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Damien Broderick Afterlife as Science Fiction

The concept of a life for humans beyond their individual deaths is very old and very widespread—as old and universal, perhaps, as dreaming. The afterlife is often held to be a consolatory fabrication devised out of grief and wishful thinking, an imagined realm where loved ones persist somehow beyond death as if they had traveled to a land beyond the hill or shore, a place where the evident injustices of mortal life are redeemed and set right, with punishment for the wicked and joyful rewards for the virtuous. Despite its evident gratifications, it is arguable that the wellspring of this idea is the real, confusing experience of half-remembered dreams. (See, for example, the 1989 article "Afterlife," by Gerald A. Larue, Professor Emeritus of Religion and Adjunct Professor of Gerontology, University of Southern California.) When we sleep, our drowsing minds mingle memory and fancy, placing us or our viewpoint surrogate inside a kind of shifting, surreal virtual reality where time loses its implacable dominion, where the dead walk among us, where strange chimeras are built from fragments of creatures, people, places, motivations, and feelings carried over from waking life.

It is easy to see how such imagined worlds, vivid and more various than humdrum narrow reality, might have enthralled our ancient ancestors, undistracted by reading, movies, television, easy travel, or frequent visitors. Certainly we know that hunter-gatherers were given to punishing the living for slights or crimes experienced only in dream, in much the way diseases and accidents were widely blamed on sorcery and ill intent. But even if these are the sources of such widespread and poignant beliefs, are they necessarily untrue for that reason? Parapsychology suggests that intentions *might* act on others without any conventional medium of influence, that thoughts might be intercepted even if unspoken. Is it possible that fantasies of life after life also offer us glimpses of a reality that scientific cultures dismiss due to its elusiveness and similarity to delusion and psychotic or protective self-deceit?

One interesting intersection between such old beliefs and the scientific *Weltanschauung* is the literary (and now cinematic) form of story-telling known as science fiction. That has been its name for less than a century, although scientific romances of various kinds—stories informed by the spirit and methods of empirical and theorized investigation of the world—can be found as far back as the first stirrings of science proper. For *sf*, the known world is all too narrow and restricted. *SF* foresees futures remade by new insights, by clever inventions flowing from scientific analysis of the profoundest structures of the universe, from string and brane to atom, gene, organism, society, planet, galaxy, and universe. If its narratives freely conjure story devices at odds with what science tells us about reality—time machines to the past, vehicles or messengers faster than light, extravagant psi powers—still they remain faithful to the *spirit* of science. Coherence and plausibility are retained; a story might violate known physics, but it has to provide some sort of quasi-scientific rationale for doing so, or at least play with the net up during its game (as Gregory Benford once put it). So how does this newest of narrative

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The Real Middle-Earth by Brian Bates
New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004;
\$16.95 tpb; 292 pages

The Science of Middle-Earth by Henry Gee
Cold Spring Harbor, New York: Cold Spring Press,
2004; \$14.00 tpb; 255 pages
reviewed by Tom Shippey

The two books reviewed here form an interesting and perhaps symptomatic contrast. In some ways they are similar. Both claim to take Tolkien seriously, to see his invented universe of Middle-Earth as something more than fantasy. Both have their eye on something beyond Middle-Earth. And in both cases one cannot help wondering, "How far do they really mean it?" Ironically, the one which seems most apparently sportive is the one which proves in the end to have dug deeper into its subject.

Brian Bates's book has a number of openly expressed theses. In the first place, he thinks that Middle-Earth is not entirely Tolkien's own invention, and in this he is certainly correct. From the nineteenth century on, scholars had been both stimulated and frustrated by discovering bits and pieces of a non-Biblical and non-Classical mythology which, they thought, had once been common knowledge across northwestern Europe. Jacob Grimm accordingly had set himself to piece together the *Deutsche Mythologie* (carefully translated into English as "Teutonic Mythology"), while the Dane Nikolai Grundtvig had even earlier brought out his *Nordens Mytologi*, "the mythology of the North." In writing *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien was doing something rather similar, though expressed as fiction, not as scholarship.

Bates goes on from here, however, to claim that "historical research" has revealed, some two thousand years ago, "a largely forgotten civilization which foreshadowed Tolkien's imagined world." Doubts begin to stir at this point. What research was that? The cultures of northwestern Europe around the year zero have always been familiar from the works of Caesar, Tacitus, and many others,

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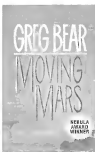
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Confusion, Troy, Michigan, during the blizzard of January 2005



David Hartwell in full regalia



Kathryn Cramer with an indoor monodrift in an isolated hallway on the sixteenth floor



David Hartwell at breakfast with Robert J. Sawyer



Confusion's Friday night concert: The Flash Girls (the Fabulous Lorraine & Emma Bull); Steve Brust on drums



Patrick Nielsen Hayden, lead guitar



Emma Bull



Steve Brust & his drum

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The Real Middle-Earth & cetera . . .

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and these are still our most important sources of information, not forgotten at all. As for "civilization"—the genuinely new information we have, derived from archaeology, often looks seriously gruesome, such as the enormous dumps of smashed weapons at sacrificial sites across southern Denmark. And was it "a" civilization? Bates is prone to talking about "Anglo-Saxons, Celts, and Norsemen" as if they were all much the same, but this covers great differences of culture and epochs of cultural change. What makes them homogeneous, he insists, is "their imaginative and inspired view of life."

This is the thesis that Bates wants to hang on the handy peg of Tolkien's popularity. He is convinced not only that these diverse people had a consistent way of life, but that he has access to it, that he knows how they thought and felt. "They thought of nature not only as an objective world, external to themselves, but as also reaching internally, with magical powers and imbued with the full richness of their imagination." Later on, "the pulse of life beat more deeply for the people of Middle-Earth than it does for us," while "For the Saxons, the natural environment was imbued with the presence of spirits, a parallel universe of sacred power." What kind of evidence can there be for such assertions? Characteristically, Bates starts with a site which he feels to be numinous, a fallen beech tree, an ancient barrow, and he muses associatively from that basis. A beech tree makes him think of runes, which might be carved on beech-wood, for the word "book" derives from Old English *bōc*, which also means "beech." As Venantius Fortunatus remarks, *Barbara finisculi pingitur runa tabella*, "Let the barbaric rune be carved on beechwood tablets." (Bates does not in fact mention this, but I am sure Avram Davidson would have done so). Having got to runes, one might well think of Runnymede, where the Magna Carta was signed, and which Bates interprets as "the area of the casting of the runes" (more likely, "council-meadow"). Trees, runes, wizards, sacred sites—it all hangs together, see, and Bates has no difficulty in throwing in the odd reference to Tolkien in support of his basic proposition. Treebeard, after all, presides over a council site in a forest, Aragorn uses plant-magic after the fashion of some surviving Anglo-Saxon recipes, Galadriel uses the "precious vibrancy of water" just like the sisters by the Well of Wyrd (or *Urd* in Old Norse) in Snorri Sturluson's account, and so on.

The trouble with all this, as with the work of so many amateur historians/etymologists, is its eclecticism. Bates never asks where his information comes from, its date, its provenance, its reliability; he never considers negative evidence or alternative scenarios; he is not interested in probability. He knows what he wants to find, and anything that supports that is plucked out of its place and struck into his developing mosaic. And what he wants to find, above all else, is a way of life which is *not like ours*, in which the subjective and the objective blend, in which we are all in touch with nature and with ourselves, and where magic works. Tolkien, I think, might have sympathized with a little of this, and a little of it comes through in landscapes like that of Lothlórien. But he would have been quite sure that it was mere delusion to think that mortals had once achieved it, and well aware of the horrific aspects of Bates's "forgotten [and pagan] civilization."

Henry Gee's book is a great deal funnier and, at the same time, much more observant of Tolkien. His basic procedure is to take some evidently fantastic element of Tolkien's world, cite everything that Tolkien tells us about it, and then try to explain how this could really have happened—in the process passing on large amounts of genuine scientific knowledge, for Gee is one of the editors of *Nature*. Take orcs, for instance. Tolkien worried increasingly about the theological problems associated with their origin and ultimate fate. Were they manufactured by Morgoth? That would allow creative powers to evil, which Tolkien was reluctant to do. So could they be brainwashed ches? No, there are just too many of them. Are they of human stock? That implies that they are capable of salvation, a thought no one in Middle-Earth entertains. Gee suggests that you have to look at the data. In the first place, orcs are quite clearly of varied types: tracker-orcs, fighter-orcs, the "mountain-maggoths" of the North, the Uruks of Saruman, etc. This suggests very isolated populations, like the mountain tribes

of New Guinea. Sauron's orcs could be seen as manufactured products, perhaps by some form of cloning, and as sexually neuter, but there are hints of sexual reproduction among the feral or mountain orcs. Perhaps their population structure was that of social insects, with a "queen" in each colony served by small numbers of drones (whom we never see), and larger numbers of workers and soldiers, the ones who come into contact with the outside world. Like aphids, they could also reproduce parthenogenetically—though one consequence of that is that we would have to think of orcs as female. They don't look female, but then, neither do dominant female hyenas, so loaded with male hormones that they "look startlingly male down to the details of their genital anatomy." So the Great Goblin was a queen, and Azog and Bolg were not father and son (as the dwarves naturally but mistakenly thought), but mother and daughter. . . . Strange, but it does save the evidence, as Tolkien himself always tried to.

Or take Balrogs. Nothing excites Tolkien fans more than the question of whether they have wings, and the textual evidence offers no conclusion. So consider, how much do they weigh, what kind of wingspan would that require, and what kind of wing? The largest flying bird known to have existed, Gee points out, was *Argentavis magnificens*, which weighed in at 180 pounds and had a wingspan of twenty feet—a creature which could certainly have picked up a hobbit, or even a half-starved Gandalf. It did need, however, a 25 mph air flow to get airborne, which demands either regular high winds to launch into or high eyries to launch off (such as the eyries of Tolkien's eagles). Pterosaurs, meanwhile, which seem to be the originals for the Nazgûl-steeds, ran even bigger but were essentially gliders, not flappers. As for Balrogs—the sums cannot be made to add up. Just not "aerodynamically feasible." What seem to be wings must be shadowy extensions of the body, like the cape of Count Dracula.

More satisfactory is Gee's consideration of dragons. The problem of breathing fire could readily be solved by some arrangement like that of the bombardier beetle, which synthesizes hydrogen peroxide and hydroquinone to be released into a combustion chamber. Dragons must have synthesized diethyl ether, kept in airtight sacs till blown across the mouth, the blood-heat of which would be quite sufficient to ignite it. Ether may also explain the fuming of dragons at rest, and the tendency of those who talk to them to be overcome by a kind of paralysis. Much more awkward is the fact that dragons appear to have six limbs, not the invariable land-vertebrate four. Genetic sports, evolution from an entirely different fishy ancestry? Gee plumps for a different kind of limb field, allowing more than one pair of forelimbs, something common among insects but not (till now) with vertebrates.

It is tempting to go on, as Gee does, and reflect on the eyesight of the elves, the nature of *mithril*, how the *palantiri* operate ("quantum entanglement" working within a grown ball of layered lithium niobate and beta carbon nitride, the former furthermore explaining the properties of the Silmarils and Galadriel's star-glass), moon-letters, oliphaunts and spiders, elvish lifespans, and much else. But the final question, at least on the technical side, has to be the Ring itself. Quantum entanglement might explain the connection between the One, the Three, the Seven, and the Nine; and if one sees the Ring as a very high density storage device, that might account for the fact that it contains some aspects of the personality of its creator, enough to give it, under some circumstances, a will of its own. String theory meanwhile suggests that there are other dimensions "normally penetrable only to gravity"; if the Ring has access to those, that would explain what happens to the Ringwraiths, who significantly "cannot detect electromagnetic radiation (which is why they are blind), but can nevertheless respond to the presence of matter, and are drawn in particular to the Ring." But puzzles remain. Bilbo, wearing the Ring, can still hear and see, and can cast faint shadows—as Ringwearers perhaps shifted a millisecond or so into the future, oscillating back just enough to make a shadow? But in any case, how does one account for the fact that the Ring makes not only its wearers but their clothes invisible? H. G. Wells saw that as a problem as long ago as *The Invisible Man*. This one is not soluble, Gee declares in the end, except by assuming that the Ring is just a hangover from fairy-tale. But since that solution is unacceptable, one has to remember instead that "science always has more to achieve." The Ring, suitably enough, is the most

inscrutable aspect of Middle-Earth.

All this is good fun, and also highly informative, but can it be serious? Something which surprised me on reading this book, as perhaps it should not have done, was to see how sympathetic a scientist could be to Tolkien's own field of comparative philology. In tracing out the "stemma" of texts copied many times, Gee notes, Tolkien was in fact pursuing what would nowadays be called "cladistics." He was in all seriousness a kind of paleontologist of the word. And this has something to do with the overall topic, or *leitmotif*, of *The Lord of the Rings* itself, which is, Gee says, not death (as this reviewer had suggested), but loss, of which death is only a special case. However, loss includes species extinction, and the loss of data, whether in the technological sphere, as seems to have happened in Middle-Earth—neither Rings nor Silmarils nor *palantíri* can be made again in the Third Age—or in the literary one, as is the case with the whole Old English or Old Norse epic traditions, of which we in this world have only a few battered and probably non-representative examples left. As in the literary sphere, so in that of fossils. Unlike most modern authors, and even more unlike most modern critics, Gee suggests, Tolkien shared a sense of the "chilly magnitudes" of ignorance which surround our little island of knowledge and belief.

Yet this can in its way be salutary. Gee notes that Tolkien's image of the Old Forest somehow under the sway of Old Man Willow, whose influence extends through the air and under the ground, has a basis in the notion of the fungal mycorrhizae, which in all reality bind together the trees of a wood into a symbiotic unit (an idea prefigured incidentally in some of the stories of the late Jim Schmitz). In the case of Old Man Willow, this is dangerous and threatening, but the elves may be capable of mulling the fauna and flora of a whole landscape

to create something at once artificial and natural, with a technology so perfect as to be "essentially contiguous with nature." This, I think, is what Brian Bates would hope to achieve, except that he has no idea of how to do so except by retreating into an essentially fantastic, technophobic, and historically ill-grounded world of the imagination. Gee, by contrast, can see Hollin, or Ithilien, or even Lothlórien, as something which humans might one day manage to create—but only if they continue to pursue the technophilic path instead of abandoning it in despair and disgust. Tolkien's Middle-Earth, for him, is an image of a possible future, not just a remote past. He closes with a short discussion of "Science and Fantasy," in which he speaks up for *The X-Files* against those graver scientists, like Richard Dawkins and John Durant, who have demanded a turn away from such pseudoscientific nonsense. "Science is not about the known," says Gee, it's about the unknown. What science fiction reader could possibly disagree?

The Science of Middle-Earth is the most unexpectedly Tolkienian book about Tolkien that I have ever come across. One of its charms—Tolkien would especially have approved of this—is that its author really likes plants, particularly trees. At one point he lists all the trees mentioned in *The Lord of the Rings*, noting that Tolkien missed only three of all the genera native to Britain, while he added a whole Mediterranean flora to Ithilien, not to mention the unknown species of *rimbulyne*, *elamor*, *niphredil*, and of course *mal-laru*—surely an evishly rare but naturally selected species of beech. One author sits under a beech and thinks his own thoughts; the other looks hard at the beech to try to see what it is. The latter approach is more respectful, as well as more productive. ▲

Tom Shippey lives in St. Louis, Missouri.

Michael Cule A Dispatch from RFPland

The excellent reviewers' guidelines for this esteemed publication offer the basic instruction that every work reviewed should be placed in the context of similar works from which it is derived. That is to say, a novel concerning lesbian vampire bikers should be compared with other works in genre concerning bikers, vampires, or lesbians and especially with other works concerning lesbian vampire bikers. (Note to self: Draft a proposal for such a catchpenny piece of tripe as soon as possible, suppressing sternly the fact you are a male, heterosexual, breathing pedestrian.)

This is, I'm sure you will agree, a fine general guideline, but it fails me in the face of the work currently under consideration. For the category that this book falls firmly into is the lamentable one of Routinized Fantasy Potboiler, a category that I invariably replace firmly on the bookshelf as soon as perusal reveals its nature. I have seen several works in this author's name and have always before now put them back after a brief perusal, firmly assigning them to the category of RFP, and reading this one has done nothing to dent the smugness of my sense of literary judgment.

How often I have wished I had the chutzpah to imitate George Bernard Shaw, who, having returned with a round condemnation a work whose later pages remained uncut and therefore unread, told the indignant author that one did not need to eat a whole egg to know it was rotten. How often have I bewailed the fact that my middle class conscience forces me to read to the end of every work just in case something redeems it. How often is that hope unfilled.

Is there any excuse for producing a work set in an imagined and fantastic place that sparks no sense of wonder, no excitement either intellectual or emotional, not even the guilty pleasure of enjoying good storytelling despite a total lack of anything more complex? (I speak as one who has read all of David Eddings's fantasy works with enjoyment even as I wince at his cruder moments.) But year after year publishers put out stuff that has nothing to recommend it to fill the maw of the Easy Reading market. Pity the poor reviewer who gets it dumped on his plate, but pity even more the poor editors and proofreaders who have to help produce the stuff.

What marks this work as RFP? Well, there's the background

for a start. It has a number of "lands" in it, mostly unnamed, undetailed, and unrealized. Most of them are sort of European, sort of feudal, with knights and peasants, fields and forests, though there are dry hot lands and cold frozen lands dotting the background. You might make some excuse for the mundane societies being only vaguely sketched out by the fact that the story concentrates on the peripheral world of the heroes and sorcerers, but they are no more than sketched out themselves. (These are only the basic guideposts. See Diana Wynne Jones's *Tough Guide to Fantasyland* for a fuller depiction of this subgenre's geography.)

The characterization is the second clue. All are monotone, single-trait pieces of cardboard, starting with the hero: noble, determined, a good friend, brave, principled, and about as interesting as a set of washing machine installation instructions in Korean. The villains are black-hearted, selfish, and about as cunning as a brick wall. They like to gloat and grandstand. The women are all virtuous and rather put-upon, except for the one who is Wise with a capital W. Peasants are superstitious, knights are either bluff or wicked, and the only people more uninteresting than the humans are the demons or the elementals, bound up by their elemental nature to be demonic or fiery or watery or airy or earthy and that's about all they get to do.

Finally, there are the plots. Here we have fairly dull quests: a hero discovers who his father was and frees his mother's love interest from slavery. It climaxes in a Big Fight involving lots of demons and almost no excitement whatsoever. Plots can be romantic; I like romance as much as the next fellow; we aging bachelors enjoy a bit of gallantry. But the affairs of these pasteboard stand-ins leave me utterly unmoved.

The book under consideration is "Volume One," indicating that there must be a stream of more such tosh, but I beg the publisher (and my editor) to spare me any more. And I would recommend the author consider the route of electronic publishing in the future to avoid insulting more dead trees with the imprint of such work. ▲

Michael Cule lives in London, England.

Afterlife as Science Fiction

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methods deal with one of the most ancient human concerns: the hope for a life of some different and even transcendent kind following our all-too-familiar life on earth?

In Heinlein's early novel, *Beyond This Horizon* (serialized 1942), the quest for proof of a life beyond death is all that makes his future utopia bearable for the jaded protagonist, Hamilton Felix. When that proof is found, ambiguously, it is more of the same—survival as reincarnation. An essence of the dead informs new infants, although memory of a former life is swiftly lost. It is a position interestingly congruent with the claims of Professor Ian Stevenson at the University of Virginia, in his series of detailed studies into cases compatible with reincarnation (*Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation*, 1967; *Children Who Remember Previous Lives*, 1987, etc.), perhaps the more interesting because Heinlein's book first appeared more than 60 years ago. Of course, this hard-headed engineer had a keen interest in Theosophical and magical doctrines, and elements of both emerge in his stories. In the novel *I Will Fear No Evil* (1970), its Biblical title speaks directly to the theme, in which a very old plutocrat's brain is transplanted into the healthy but brain-damaged body of a beautiful young woman. They conduct an internal dialogue throughout the novel, and while it is not clear until the end if this is a kind of hallucination or a form of "somatic memory," it seems clear that each has a soul that finally passes into a different kind of realm. That realm seems to be the sort of Ur-state of a partitioned divinity suggested at a key moment in *Beyond This Horizon*, when ill, unconscious Hamilton momentarily merges with a game-playing Mind that seems to shift from one personality to another, and even change games (and universes) at whim.

It was pleasant to be dead . . . The next time he would not choose to be a mathematician. Dull, tasteless stuff, mathematics—quite likely to give the game away before it was played out. No fun in the game if you knew the outcome . . . It was always like this on first waking up. It was always a little hard to remember which position Himself had played, forgetting that he had played all of the parts. Well, that was the game; it was the only game in town, and there was nothing else to do. Could he help it if the game was crooked? Even if he had made it up and played all the parts.

But he would think up another game the next time.
(152-3)

This is by no means a conventional religious or mystical premise, not even for an Eastern faith; it is more like the kind of solipsistic faux-religious of apparatus later developed by Heinlein's fellow *Asounding SF* pulp writer, L. Ron Hubbard. From such an uncompromisingly Cartesian perspective, the only thing that exists is an observing, constructing mind, but that mind is not identifiable with any one of us. It is not so much that there is an afterlife following this one; rather, our mortal lives are small fictions or roles played out within innumerable "fictions," or alternative realities (as suggested slyly in *The Number of the Beast* (1979), where Heinlein is himself, as Author, the Beast under various guises).

Oddly, the massive and authoritative *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (1993), edited by John Clute and Peter Nicholls, contains a substantial thematic entry for REINCARNACTION but none for AFTERLIFE. This topic does receive an entry, along with an even longer treatment of POSTHUMOUS FANTASY, as well as REINCARNACTION, in the companion volume, *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (1997), edited by John Clute and John Grant. The distinction reflects the way commercial imaginative fiction has split into the twin modes of *science fiction* and *fantasy*. The former maintains a clearer aspiration to realism (although often of a gaudy and inflated kind), while fantasy's adherence is to something more Gothic and shadowy. The metaphors of sf are intended, by and large, to be taken literally; those of fantasy remain somewhat allegorical, parabolic, dreamlike. So it is understandable that the larger part of fanciful fiction dealing with an afterlife is couched in the older forms of frank fantasy, where angels, fairies, ghosts, haunts,

heavens, hells, and gods are part of the familiar landscape, not an intrusion to be rationalized and treated theoretically. Yet it is the ambition of parapsychology to deal with topics such as telepathy and an afterlife on the basis that they are as real as the post office and the tourist agency's offerings, if rather more difficult to put on a paying and taxable basis. So sf's approach to the afterlife is probably more salient than fantasy's, even if the pickings are thinner on the ground and perhaps less emotionally appealing or moving.

None of this implies that science fiction writers have avoided the theme of an afterlife, although it is true that sf is typically redemptive, materialist, and atheist in orientation. If humans attain transcendence, as in the closing movements of Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End* (1953), it is usually via incorporation into a kind of cosmic Overmind that is not so much divine as immanent in the spacetime structure of the universe. The format of earthly minds—of brains in bodily action, complete with memories and senses—is somehow written into a more permanent and subtle form of matter or energy field. This is precisely the iterated fate of the deathless citizens of Diaspar, in Clarke's *The City and the Stars* (1956). A billion years hence, the citizens of this last and greatest city live for a millennium and then are dissolved back into computer-stored memories, to be embodied again many millennia later, memories returning in maturity. And in Clarke's 2001, this transformation is reported as the history of the first denizens of the galaxy, and by implication as our own destiny:

The first explorers of Earth had long since come to the limits of flesh and blood; as soon as their machines were better than their bodies, it was time to move. First their brains, and then their thoughts alone, they transformed into shining new homes of metal and plastic. . . . In their ceaseless experimenting, they had learned to store knowledge in the structure of space itself, and to preserve their thoughts for eternity in frozen lattices of light. They could become creatures of radiation, free at last from the tyranny of matter. . . . Into pure energy, therefore, they presently transformed themselves. . . . Now they were lords of the galaxy, and beyond the reach of time. They could tove at will among the stars, and sink like a subtle mist through the very innerstices of space. (184)

This is not so much an afterlife as the emergence of a butterfly from a pupa.

In Bob Shaw's *The Palace of Eternity* (1969), souls are *egons*, immortal self-sustaining extraterrestrial patterns of energy that attain awareness via rapport with material, planet-bound creatures. "As the physical host grows and matures, his central nervous system becomes increasingly complex. . . ." This development is matched by the *egon*, which is set free when the host dies. "Equipped with an identity, a highly complex pattern of self-sustaining energy, it is reborn to its heritage of endless life." (132)

But if something like this were true, why would it give us humans comfort? Because, Shaw proposes, "as far as the host is concerned, death is merely the doorway to this new life—because he is the *egon*." (132) The same idea informed veteran author Clifford D. Simak's *Time and Again* (1951); Brian Stableford notes that his "alien symbionts which infest all living things are obviously analogous to souls." (2002)

This is a curious inversion of the old legend of the vampire, which sucks the life out of the warm living. (Vampires, of course, are neither dead, "passed across," nor resurrected, but uncannily undead.) Indeed, the pop existentialist Colin Wilson has published several garbled but intriguing novels adapting this theme: explicitly as predators on human "life-fields," in *The Space Vampires* (1976), but more metaphorically in *The Mind Parasites* (1967) and *The Philosopher's Stone* (1969), which draw upon the horror myths of H. P. Lovecraft to construct an eerie secret history of humans as prey to disembodied creatures.

In a long sequence of novels about the immense Rivetworld where all postmortem humanity awakens (*To Tower Scatterd Bodies Go*, 1971; *The Fabulous Riverboat*, 1971; *The Dark Design*, 1977; *The Magic Labyrinth*, 1980; *Gods of the Riversworld*, 1983, etc.), Philip José Farmer proposes, like Simak and Shaw, that we are born lacking

immortal souls. In his cosmos, compassionate aliens will someday construct a sort of plug-in spiritual module or "watham" for the technologically resurrected dead, who henceforth will enjoy the kind of deathless preternatural life once ascribed by Catholic theologians to unbaptized infants in Limbo; fallen humankind makes a hash of these plans. A similar notion plays out in several novels by Spider Robinson (*Time Pressure*, 1987; *Lifelous*, 1997), in which time travelers from the future create a device in the past that captures and sustains the memories of the dying, salvaging all of us from mortal extinction. I used a comparable idea in *The Dreaming Dragons* (1980), where a subterranean Soul Core of perfectly resonant neutronium crystal has archived all the minds of humanity since our evolutionary emergence, and creates for the dead a variety of virtual worlds as their new home.

This general idea has been advanced quite seriously in turn by physicist Frank Tipler of Tulane University. In *The Physics of Immortality* (1995), he argued in prodigious detail, complete with mathematics and game-theory equations, that a closed universe will evolve toward a Teilhardian Omega Point god state (as in my *The Judas Mandala*, 1982) that will recreate or resurrect every person who has ever lived, and indeed every person who might ever have lived, to enjoy an endless paradise packed exponentially into the closing fractions of a second of the extinguishing Big Crunch cosmos. It is a breathtaking perspective, and not particularly credible (even less so now that we know the cosmos is doomed to accelerate and cool endlessly rather than collapse in a reverse of the Big Bang's fires), but has been adopted by a number of sci-fi writers, such as Frederik Pohl in his Eschaton trilogy (*The Other End of Time*, 1996; *The Siege of Eternity*, 1997; *The Far Shore of Time*, 2000). Again, while these approaches to an afterlife are audacious and based to some extent on recent physics, they are not at all like the traditional images provided by anthropology, theology, or mysticism.

Neither is a more plausible medium-term possibility discussed in both sf and futurist studies: the uploaded personality. If a mind is just the brainy body in action, responding to the world, other people, and its own memories and concepts, then in principle it might be feasible to make a one-to-one mapping between each working element of the brain and a more durable machine substrate. (See <www.biblibio.org/strout/uploading/ for more on this.) Greg Egan has explored this kind of notion in a number of stories ("Learning to Be Me," 1990; *Permutation City*, 1994; *Diaspora*, 1997), as have Fred Pohl (the Gateway sequence, 1977-2004), John Varley ("Overdrawn at the Memory Bank," 1976), Charles Stross (*Accelerando*, 2005), and many other sf writers. In some of Egan's stories, future citizens have a "jewel" (or dual) implanted hygienically in their brain at an early age. Each neurological action is detected and copied into the vast storage of the jewel. Finally the internal structure of the jewel becomes an exact copy of the brain it shares, running in parallel to its organic original, and the vulnerable brain itself is disposed of, like the vestigial vermiform appendix.

The upload option, creepy as it must seem at first, promises a kind of immortality, since it amounts to recording a regular backup of your mind-state that can be reinstated if your present instantiation dies. The new you would lack your most recent memories, especially if you died violently. "She started quivering again. The person who had written that final paragraph," reflects the revived or downloaded backup of a character in Ken MacLeod's *Newton's Wake* (2004), "was a person different from herself. . . . Her other self had been changed . . . by some experience other than approaching death, in some way that her present self could not understand." (211) So of course that sort of machine-mediated afterlife is entirely different from the kinds imagined by religions or other supernaturalist doctrines. What's more, many critics (I am one, and MacLeod too, it seems) refuse to accept that a restored copy is the lost person; rather, he or she is just another person sharing the original's memories and concerns (see my *The Spire*, 2001, for a longer discussion). At the minimal extreme, an upload is used in sf as a sort of convenient talking book or oracle, the personality of the dead stored indefinitely and accessible, if somewhat mechanical in tone, as in Cordwainer Smith's "Alpha Ralphs Boulevard." (1961)

Meanwhile, interestingly, the established Christian churches

are less exercised than one might expect on topics such as immanent machine intelligence and perhaps machine consciousness. In a remarkable address in Rome in December, 2004, the president of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, Archbishop John Foley, declared that the evolution of technology now raises the question whether "it is about humanizing the machine or about transforming man into something inhuman?" The president of the Pontifical Council for Culture, Cardinal Paul Poupard, added that while "the machine seems to be the negation of man and robotics, the annulment of the spiritual dimension" (a fear consonant with Philip K. Dick's sf obsessions), still "God has given man intelligence, which has enabled him to produce ever-more sophisticated machines, and has left him free to make his choices. We are the ones who create our technological reality and confront the evolution of a new dimension in which human intelligence is united to artificial intelligence" <www.zenit.org/english/visualizza.php?sid=62884>. That is a remarkable admission, and one that eventually might help bridge the gap between ancient dreams of an unprovable afterlife, and technodreams of afterlife mediated by the kinds of mechanisms imagined so far only in science fiction.

What if the whole world of experience is a sort of elaborate and deceitful simulation, as in the movie trilogy begun in 1999 with *The Matrix*, and the little-known Daniel Galouye novel *Simulacron-3* (1964) that preceded those movies by decades and was directed for German television by Rainer Werner Fassbinder as *Wohin am Drakt* (1973) and later filmed by Joseph Rusnak—with Craig Bierko and Armin Mueller-Stahl—as *The Thirteenth Floor* in 1999? This is not inconceivable; already we have quite lifelike and quasi-artificially intelligent toy worlds such as *The Sims*. If our own civilization continues uninterrupted, growing in computational prowess and raw power, our posthuman descendants might choose to run simulations of our present epoch. Suppose they make very many of these, indistinguishable in their fine grain (especially to the simulated inhabitants) from the original world? Well, then, considerations of probability suggest that our own world is most likely to be one of these simulations. (See several papers by the philosopher Nick Bostrom available at <www.simulation-argument.com>, and my novel *God Players*, 2005.) In such a nested cosmos, it is possible that death can close down not only each individual human consciousness but the entire world—not in a redemptive religious Rapture or cosmic calamity billions of years hence, but at any moment, if the programmer running the sim grows bored with it. On the other hand, a kind of afterlife might be found if the same personality templates or algorithms are reused in various quite different simulations, or if particularly delightful or wicked sims are recorded as art works or object lessons, to be archived or replayed at will. Of course, this prospect is nothing at all like the afterlife as reported by spiritualists and explorers of Near Death Experience, but those, too, have been the source of interesting sf, most notably Connie Willis's award-winning novel *Passage* (2001), which offers a plausible but debunking evolutionary explanation for NDE as complex hallucination.

In short, the theme of the afterlife has been taken down many odd and hitherto-unthought roads, as well as many that are well trodden. For example, a high-tech but barbarian culture in my own novel *The White Aeneas* (1997) maintains that the soul is anchored to the body via the vermiform appendix, which helps explain the more deplorable excesses of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries when appendectomies became commonplace. In my story "Thy Sting" (1987), study of the full genome reveals that many introns, apparently "junk" genetic intrusions, are actually a repository of living ancestral experiences, perhaps non-locally connected to their originals, permitting partial recovery of memories from our forebears. An entire anthology of exemplary sf stories is *Afterlives* (1986), edited by Pamela Sargent and Ian Watson. The editors offer "aliens providing an afterlife and advanced human technology producing artificial resurrection. . . . the 'timeless moment,' as well as vicious warfare in the godless heavens. . . . the passage between life and death . . . afterlives that are bizarre, happy, obsolete, inverted, frightening, tragic, and comic" (xvii).

That is a neat summary of sf's conceptual approach to afterlife: all and anything, except, generally, the solemn and sacerdotal. Sargent and Watson's useful gathering does neglect a little-known but unnerving "Paratime" oddity by H. Beam Piper, "The Last Enemy" (1950): in a parallel universe, reincarnation continues to segregate people on class and ideological lines. Also omitted is one of the most famous tales of a zombieified afterlife, Robert Silverberg's "Born with the Dead" (1974), a literate and chilly portrait of a man obsessed by his dead Eurydicean wife, revived to a passionless or at least incomprehensible state by future medicine; a kind of Orpheus, he chooses finally to join her in living death, and by inevitable bitter irony shares her cool, unattached condition.

This is an ancient dread of life beyond death: that it will be calculating, distant, unemotional, or at best menacing and cruel. It is the vision of death at the heart of Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Farthest Shore* (1972), where death is a remote silent realm akin to an Egyptian frieze, or the more recent aching, awful vision of Philip Pullman in *The Amber Spyglass* (2000), the concluding volume of his immensely rich Miltonic trilogy, *His Dark Materials*. These two are fantasies rather than sf proper, but their methods follow in most ways the prescription of sf: careful creation of variant worlds with their own lawful rules not to be broken by caprice. It is significant that Pullman's sequence describes as a liberation the literal withering and death of God (or god, or Gnostic Yahweh), and the freeing of the trapped dead—each of us has a glam personal Death that accompanies us in life, and beyond the grave—in a sort of redemptive evaporation "into the night, the starlight, the air . . . gone, leaving behind . . . a vivid little burst of happiness . . ." (364).

Then there are liminal states, ontological disruptions at the margins of death and life, a favorite haunt of Philip K. Dick. In *Ubik* (1969), his characters are frozen in a cryonic half-life after a fatal explosion, their minds gradually ebbing, leaking into one another, fabricating simulacra of realities into which bizarre and blackly comic irrationalities intrude. Is this the shape of an afterlife we might yet attain if cryonic suspension is developed further, so that many people wait, after clinical death, in a sort of chilly ambivalence for future resurrection? That is certainly the background of a key character in my novel *Transcension* (2002), who is sliced and diced and reconstructed, eventually forming part of the core description of the Aleph, a machine intelligence of nearly supernatural power. It is the Aleph's decision to store all the world's people, if they agree (as most do), in simulated worlds prior to escaping the limitations of our four-dimensional cosmos for somewhere roomier and more hospitable. This is an afterlife to rival those of the old pagans, but it lacks the truly transcendental (and paradoxical) character of contemporary faiths.

Dick's recurrent obsession was a standoff between the human—the poignant existential reality of *qualia* and sensitivity—and the android—a cold precence, in the form of machines that nag, pester, advise, loom, threaten, and displace the human. In some stories, a protagonist learns with dismay that he is a machine, even a programmed bomb aimed at real humans. In *Eye in the Sky* (1957), the world is an illusion, or series of illusions, created by several characters at odds with each other at the moment of their death. In the film *Battle Runner* (1982), loosely based on Dick's fine and complex dystopia *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), an android-killing operative faces artificial people as complex and passionate as himself. Indeed, there are hints (in the movie, though not in the novel) that he is himself an android loaded with fake memories. If an afterlife is the blessed repose for souls graduating from this Vale of Tears, may an android dream of Ecumenical Sleep?

May any artificial consciousness—assuming (as a large number of sf works do) that such beings will some day be constructed—be deemed to have a "soul" capable of salvation and endurance beyond this life? The question might be sophistry, as most unbelievers maintain. Or it might be that a sufficiently complex mental structure, whether organic, silicon, or quantum, generates some kind of organized field that might persist after its substrate's death. This notion has been advanced as (unorthodox) science by Professor Johnjoe McFadden (*Quantum Evolution: The New Science of the Life Force*, 2000), and by parapsychologically informed biologists and

physicists such as Rupert Sheldrake and Evan Harris Walker. It was a staple of John W. Campbell's *Astounding/Analog* magazine in the '50s and '60s, and influential in other major sf magazines as well, such as *Galaxy*, where Robert Shekley's *Immortality, Inc.* (1959) was first serialized in 1958–9 as *Time Killer*. Shekley's method of immortality amounted to hijacking the bodies of others, a putative form of vampiric afterlife that some spiritualists dub "drop-ins."

That trope is used on a very large scale in Peter F. Hamilton's "new space opera" trilogy, *Night's Dawn* (*The Reality Dysfunction*, 1996; *The Neutronium Alchemist*, 1997; *The Naked God*, 1999), where dead souls erupt to infest the living across many stellar systems and thousands of pages. Perhaps the bleakest image of human afterlife to date (aside from Paul Anderson's "The Martyr" (1960), where it turns out that humans, unlike aliens, simply don't have immortal souls) is my own "The Womb" (1998). I draw upon another widespread recent mythos, the UFO abduction narrative, to portray an Earth penetrated by dark matter and dark energy that hosts fetus-like Grey aliens sprung from energy correlates of unborn human neural systems. This heterodox theology is perhaps the concoction of a bogus religious abductee, or it might be the simple and terrible truth:

We are of no more significance in the real universe, the invisible, impalpable immensity of dark matter that comprises the true cosmos, than a lump of bloody afterbirth . . . The meaning of human life is not afterlife but afterbirth: we are a disposable stage in the production of the Children of Heaven, our Scions, the first casts, the happy miscarriages, the uncorrupted, abortions. Those who perish in the flesh before crude matter has infected, corrupted and swiftly corroded their potentially immortal souls. . . . We produce foetuses with souls. If they're lucky, they die in time. Or the grey doctors come down and harvest them. (117–8, 124)

By contrast, the legacy of shamans, spirit seers, channelers, Baudiv electronic voice interpreters, NDE experiencers, and ghost hunters remains an insistence that afterlife is provable, that evidence is abundant to those with eyes to see and ears to hear. The burden of proof, however, seems to fall back as ever upon subjective criteria of evidence and the reliability of fallible testimony. This claim has been given vivid visual expression in such semi-sf movies as *Fatalities* (1990), where young medical students deliberately induce NDEs and apparently suffer a blurring of their worlds between this and the next. In Natalie Wood's final movie, director and special effects genius Douglas Trumbull's *Brainstorm* (1983), a scanner captures and displays the transition between death and afterlife. A 2005 movie, *White Noise*, draws upon the idea that hissing tape noise might be modulated by the dead to convey barely detectable messages to the living. In *What Dreams May Come* (1998), based on Richard Matheson's novel, a man follows his dead and psychically wounded wife through a harrowing of hell in a quite astonishing blend of bathos and pathos. For Kevin Costner in the silly but oddly haunting *Field of Dreams* (1989), ghosts of eight disgraced Chicago White Sox ball players are summoned when he builds a baseball field on his Midwest farm. *Ghaur* (1990) is street-parapsychological in tenor. *Cliverses Are* (1989) has a dead husband return as the boyfriend of his wife's daughter, who then falls in love with the still-grieving widow. In 2004, Nicole Kidman in *Born* carried this to a creepier level, persuaded that a ten-year-old boy is her dead husband returned. Are these sf? Probably not, or not quite, there is no enabling super-machinery, no rationalization in terms of psi powers. Still, such movies perhaps might not have their impact without the prior immense success of sf tropes in the cinema, and the sf-based special effects that enthrall fairytales into the dazzling representational realism of cinema.

Back here in our shared empirical world, as Sargent and Watson noted astutely two decades ago, "Nationalist politics as mediated by Islamic clergy has now given us modern religious martyrs, while in the most advanced technological country many millions of fundamentalist Christians view nuclear Armageddon with positive enthusiasm, for those who believe will be 'raptured' to heaven" (1986, xiii). Since that observation, terrorist "martyrs," convinced that they,

after dying, go to a banal paradise of 72 virgins for every man, have wrought horror in that technological heartland. This kind of dire slow-burn Armageddon has rarely been treated with any nuance in sf.

The general background assumption, after all, has been that a belief in an afterlife will wither away as technology serves up utopia. While it is true—despite rumors to the contrary—that more people now live more secure and comfortable lives than ever before in history, with lifespans increasing in the privileged parts of the world, a suspicion grows that wealthy Westerners thrive at the expense of the rest, and at the cost of a world rushing into greenhouse and resource-depletion horror. Reincarnation might prove less tempting to believe in as that suspicion hardens. Steadily disbelief, though, is a stoic virtue perhaps beyond the grasp of suffering people who defer their hopes to a better life beyond the grave.

Unless mediums and parapsychologists can demonstrate unequivocally that such a domain is real and attainable, its adherents will regard the afterlife as something to be hoped for in private faith, rather than by watertight public evidence, and that is a

posture somewhat antithetical to the spirit of science fiction. As more desperados rich and poor blow themselves and their victims apart, we might expect sf to turn away in resolute revulsion from the premise of spiritual afterlife, and emphasize instead the kinds of technofixes described above: cryonic suspension in expectation of eventual medical repair, rejuvenation, indefinite life extension, uploads, a transformative transition to some posthuman condition we can scarcely yet imagine. Death will be defeated, if science fiction is right, so that after life we can expect more life, and after that more, and still more, perhaps to the re-ignition or budding off elsewhere of a drained and failing cosmos. ►

Damien Broderick lives in Melbourne, Victoria, and San Antonio, Texas. This paper will appear in a forthcoming McFarland volume, *Survival of Human Consciousness: Essays on the Possibility of Life after Death*, edited by Lance Storm and Michael Thalbourne, *Anomalous Psychology Research Unit, Department of Psychology, University of Adelaide, due out in late 2005 or early 2006*.

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As I write, the World Wide Web has been in existence for 15 years, routinely used by researchers for at least a decade. It seems entirely redundant, therefore, to provide exact bibliographical details of books that can be found most readily by consulting the Internet Speculative Fiction Database <www.isfdb.org/sfdbase.html>, Google, Amazon.com, Abebooks.com, or the Library of Congress catalogue on-line <catalog.loc.gov>. This is especially true in respect of sf novels, anthologies and collections, which typically appear in transient paperbacks in many printings. Consequently, the few items I list here are chiefly books where I give page references to a specific edition or which are difficult to locate. Short stories (from the pulp magazines now mostly inaccessible, but usually gathered in anthologies) can be found most conveniently, in various editions, in their ISFDB listings.

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Crossroads: Tales of the Southern Literary Fantastic, edited by F. Brett Cox and Andy Duncan

New York: Tor Books, 2004; \$24.95 hc; 384 pages
 reviewed by Joe Sutcliffe Sanders

Appearing periodically from under the mountain of work I've had on my desk for the last several months has been F. Brett Cox and Andy Duncan's new (well, new when I received it in August) collection of short stories written by authors with some connection to the Southern United States and writing in the fantastic tradition. Each time the book peeked out at me, I felt both guilt for holding on to a book that probably needed more attention and anticipation for the stories inside. That anticipation (and guilt) grew until I realized I had probably driven myself to expectations so high that I would be disappointed no matter how good the product was.

So it is with great relief I can report that this book has lived up to the hype. I kept waiting for the quality of the stories to dip, and though there is one story that I felt was significantly weaker than the rest, one dud to well over a score of successes is a ratio I'll take any day. It's a completely satisfying collection characterized by variety and thoughtfulness, appropriate for quiet evenings of introspective reading. And the stories are also tremendously enjoyable, suitable for distraction on airplanes or beaches. Take for example Sena Jeter Naslund's story about gardens, the piano, and motherhood. The story revolves around a suddenly rejuvenated mother who plays Chopin with a poetry she has never been able to achieve in all the previous decades she has practiced it. There's a subtle magic at work in the plot, one never fully explained, and though I have to confess I didn't get whatever the point of the story was, I had a great time on the ride. It's a story I need to chew over longer, and I'm looking forward to doing so because it was such a joy the first time. That's a balance that most of these stories strike: intelligent and amusing all at once.

The stories are culled from literary magazines of various sizes, professional genre magazines, original anthologies, and new

submissions, including more than one first sale. I won't hide the fact that I'm a little disappointed over how many of the big-name genre writers provided (or perhaps were asked for) stories published elsewhere, including some stories that have been published first in a magazine, then in one or even more anthologies before getting yet another exposure here. So I find myself asking what the purpose of the anthology is. As I read the book, this question kept nagging me. The mission of the work isn't to present new work, since there are a handful of reprints (one of them with a 1980 copyright); it isn't to preserve hard-to-find work, though some of the pieces here do fit that description; and it isn't to present a complete tour of the Southern Literary Fantastic, whatever that is (there's no Waldrop, Bisson, or Gibson, who would surely be central to such a project). With the book behind me, I'm still not completely sure I can answer that question, but I have a better guess: perhaps this is a book intended to provide in one volume some of the best and most varied fiction in this mode. Since most extant collections of the fantastic rely exclusively on genre writers, this book reaches out of the genre's typical publication pool to pull in what writers outside our community are doing. That's for the benefit of those of us reading the fantastic from within the tradition. Since most nongenie short fiction collections ignore stories originally published by genre magazines, *Crossroads* also serves the community outside the usual readership for the fantastic by presenting them with some of the most successful experiments our own writers have been making. If my guess is right and this is the mission of the book, it's a unique and valuable addition to the field, because the mission is a success.

The one characteristic these stories most often share is a density that provides the chewiness to which I have alluded before. Genre

Wolfe's "Houston, 1943," for example, is a story about a boy whose ghost is swept into a strange voodoo plot that the author avoids explaining. The sides of the battle continually shift, with half-promises of redemption, wealth, and love muddying the already conflicted character motivations. The magic's rules are unclear in that way that old, old traditions are unclear but no one questions them. By the end of the story, the boy at the center makes some courageous and difficult choices that point to his coming of age. Similarly complex is Honorée Fanonne Jeffers's lead-off story, "A Plate of Mojo." Pearl is a woman now, trying to distance herself from the memory of her mother, but she lives in a community too close-knit, too noisy to let the history of charms and sex lie in the mother's grave. The lines between master and servant blur uncomfortably, again leaving the magic unauthorized and corrosive under the façade of genteel life.

The volume's introduction points out that the editors had no thematic agenda, then goes on to recognize that a few particular themes emerged anyway. One of the most common is that familiar Romantic obsession with transience. James L. Cambias's "See My King All Dressed in Red," one of the many strong original stories in the volume, is a wonderful story about the passing of Mardi Gras. But the old carnival isn't painted in pastels and soft lights. What the story opposes to the (literally) Disneyfied version of Mardi Gras that survives into the future is an ugly but alluring history of people swept away with abandon and cultures swirling around each other in unesthetic ways. The viewpoint of the story is allowed by a sweet romance story lent character by the queer origins and nature of the romance. "Rose," by Bret Lott, also a story about lovers, is one of the stories in the collection in explicit dialogue with the fiction of previous Southern writers, this time one of Faulkner's most famous short stories. Lott's is a classic example of a familiar story told from a perspective that undoes the assumptions of the original. Whereas the original focused on the lovely face and careful secrets arranged to protect grotesque truths, this one is about serving a memory as intimately macabre as it is plaintive. Both are moving stories of desperate grabs at fading histories.

Some of the stories enter into an interesting dialogue, thematically, with each other. Brad Watson's "Water Dog God: A Ghost Story" brings to the center an obsession with old sins and

how their consequences linger. When a flood hits the viewpoint character's family, he manages to rescue his niece, a young woman who has hardly ever left her father's remote house but is nonetheless quite pregnant. Water and family just plague the rest of the story, and not even righteous punishment can fully cleanse the taint of these transgressions. Ian McDowell's "Making Faces" plays with the theme in more literal ways, as an odd artifact used to carry old sins to an earthly version of hell reemerges in a family torn by grief, alcoholism, and the South's most conflicted and influential power: Christian fundamentalism. Demons, crows, and graffiti converge in an odd church to help the family name their own sins and begin the process of disavowing them, though the road ahead isn't yet clear to them.

And John Kessel's reprint contribution, "Every Angel Is Terrifying," closes the volume with a characteristically thoughtful take on the theme. The protagonist has committed a host of sins, terrible wrongs for which he deserves to be punished, but a victim's last words and her uncanny pet lead him to believe he has a chance to break free of them. He takes a bad job and a small room, falls in love, and reads his Bible, but when his plans are frustrated, he falls back into his old ways easily. His sins pile heavily on him, and when he turns to face them—this is the brilliant twist—they're gone. The story asks if we don't need these old sins to linger at least long enough for us to recognize them. Given the disgust the previous stories articulated for lingering sins, Kessel's story finds a way to reinvestigate the theme by having the character reach out to embrace the sins of the past, only to find a horrible emptiness where they should have been.

I do have complaints about this collection—too many reprints by marquee authors and too unfocused a thesis—but those complaints are more the result of my fussiness than they are significant problems in the book. The editors have done a wonderful job of searching widely for excellent fiction that fits the mode, and there's very little chance that anyone else would have spotted the connections between these stories if Cox and Duncan hadn't started the conversation. The fiction is both thoughtful and entertaining, and the best stories are powerful, longing tales. In short, this is a lengthy collection with an enormous amount of good reading. ▶

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Ursula Pflug Telling the Dream to Kalalau

At Kalalau, even when you're awake, it will seem as if you must be dreaming.

—Kathleen Ann Goonan

Footsteps on the air.

—Ursula K. Le Guin

Each fragment is conveyed with the intimacy of our own dreams, utterly familiar and at the same time foreign and unknowable.

—Goonan on Elisabeth Vonarburg's *Dreams of the Sea*

A couple of months ago I dreamt I was in Havelock, a village near to my own. It's a tiny place which thrived in the days of the train, a junction between many lines, giving rise to a transient, high-spirited population. Live music filled the houses, and everyone knew the bootlegger by her first name. Since its heyday Havelock has suffered enormous population loss, and is now a place with few economic opportunities, a hotel that has at times been a minor crime scene unto itself, and a lot of derelict houses amongst the few century-old brick homes that are well kept.

I know all this because a few years ago I was funded, in partnership with writer Ian McEwan and several arts and community organizations, to write a play based on local history. It was part theater project, part community development. The cast included a seasoned lead actor and a professional director from the nearby city of Peterborough, but the mainstays were the still-musical, still-storytelling townsfolk themselves, including one dapper elderly woodcarver who had worked on the trains for half his life and knew

by heart every train song ever recorded, or so it seemed. I had a friend who worked overseas as a sound man on documentaries, and he came to the empty historical town hall with his trusty Nagra, and we recorded Claire Logan for hours, sitting on the dusty, disused stage. In the end, "Hallelujah, I'm a Bum" was staged not just in the town hall itself, but in front of the equally old train station, with cast, crew, and audience members walking from one location to another at intermission. Mr. Logan played the patriarch in our play, and was able to tell his own stories all over again, and sing "The Wreck of the Old 97" in his booming baritone voice.

Why am I telling this story? There was something magical about the entire process, about asking people who were the largely unsung keepers of local history not just to share their stories with us, so that we might scribe and record and then hide them away in some archive, but also to play themselves, or people like themselves, or their parents or grandparents. Working on this project, I often felt like a character in an Ursula K. Le Guin novel, specifically, an observer hired by the Ekumen to study a native planetary culture. My husband found *Four Ways to Forgiveness* at a used book shop and bought it for me at Christmas, but it wasn't until I recently read *The Telling*, a 2000 release, and Le Guin's first Hainish novel in twenty years, that I really understood. Working in Havelock, I was *The Telling's* narrator Sully, or someone very like her.

Our work in Havelock was ostensibly a theatre project, but more precisely the creation of a living mirror between old stories and present lives. In Le Guin's *The Telling*, Sully is hired by the Ekumen to study the old culture on the planet Aka, largely subsumed by the coming of the Ekumen themselves. The inhabitants of that world, in a perhaps gross

misunderstanding of what the progenitors/visitors actually stand for, rush headlong into a technologically-based, producer/consumer society, embracing the myth of progress and sweeping all their own old ways aside, including making much of their original culture illegal.

What is reality? More specifically, what is dreaming? Québec writer Elisabeth Vonarburg's masterpiece, *Tyrannal*, thirty years in the making, asks just this question. Extrapolated from a dream she had as a teenager, the first book in the five-volume series has at long last been translated into English, by Howard Scott, in collaboration with Vonarburg herself. The translation comes complete with a new title, *Dreams of the Sea*.

In *Dreams of the Sea*, the original inhabitants have disappeared, although it is hinted that they all joined The Sea, not wishing to still be there when The Strangers (or Earthlings) arrive. There is a gap in time between the studied culture and the subsuming one. And yet the past dreams the future, and on occasion the future seems about to dream the past, and certainly it inhabits it in a very concrete way, as the colonists move into the abandoned cities of the ancients. There is, again, a constant mirroring between past and present, and a shaping of each that arises from this process. In *The Telling*, Satty goes north to the village Oskaz-Oskaz, and then further north, having heard stories of an ancient library where many versions of *The Telling* have been placed for safekeeping. In *Dreams of the Sea*, iconoclastic Terran archaeologist Shandaz Wang studies the old cities, uncovering secrets which first reveal and then once again hide themselves. In the far north, on the planet Tyrannal, life most resembles that of the first colonists. Marooned from their ship by the coming of The Sea, they moved into the old cities the natives left behind, and adopted or adapted their non-electronic technologies. These people never quite become the natives; they are more of an overlay. But to the later waves of colonizers who live in glitzy cities copied from Earth, this first wave of settlers has become almost indistinguishable from the mysterious ancients. By the end of the book these people are changing, the children in particular, and we suspect there will be more links between former and subsequent inhabitants of Virginia, as Tyrannal has been renamed, than we have seen thus far.

The other day my musical daughter needed new strings for her guitar. We usually drive to Peterborough but it was almost closing time, and at the last moment I remembered there was a new music store on the main road (really the highway, across from the historical train station) and so I called, asking if they could stay open a few minutes more while we drove over for a packet of strings. They agreed, but when we got there, I discovered to my embarrassment I couldn't pay for the strings, as my hubby had put the truck repairs on the Visa, and I knew quite well the checking account was empty, as it was the last day of the month. But the people who ran the store, sitting outside in lawn chairs on the sidewalk, told us to take the strings and come back the next day with the money. My daughter had played at a benefit for the flood victims of Peterborough, and they knew who she was.

The spirit of the old Hawkeek lived on, I thought, musical and forgiving of cash and credit shortfalls. I was observer Satty all over again, it was another of those tiny moments that made me appreciate the rural area where I've made my home for the past sixteen years, although that might make me more akin to one of the early colonists in *Dreams of the Sea* who, cut off from Earth (read the Toronto whence I came), took up the old ways here. In what city, I asked myself, would the store owners stay open late so you could come in for a packet of strings, and then let you have them anyway even when you couldn't pay? "Will you be playing on the church steps again on Sunday?" the store owners asked my daughter as we left. Perhaps it is precisely because Hawkeek is in far decline from its economic heyday of seventy-five years ago as a booming train town, that some of the old ways continue. It is the little things that make our lives rich, we have often been told. The stories, the food, the music, the small kindnesses to neighbours and strangers.

In both *The Telling* and *Dreams of the Sea*, a deeply rich, storytelling culture has been largely subsumed by a work and gadget-obsessed one. In *Tyrannal* stories are told, myths reshaped at the supper table, but the most important stories are those which are dreamt and recorded onto metal plates and watched and studied by

other alimdzai. In narrator Effai Liannoon Klafidaru's case, they are Dreams of the future, she is the only Dreamer with this skill. And to experience this book is a little like living the life of a Dreamer oneself: Vonarburg too is an alimdzai, for *Tyrannal* was a dream first, both enigmatic and profound, as the best dreams and the best novels are.

In my recent dream an ocean had suddenly appeared in Hawkeek (much like The Sea in *Tyrannal*) south of the highway. There were beach parks, but they were largely empty, and the oceanfront was undeveloped. In my dream, an editor from a local weekly told me you could buy a little oceanfront house for fifty thousand dollars, because no one had yet quite noticed the beach was even there. I tried, in the dream, to visualize the new map in my head (like the map when The Sea is there, and the second map when it isn't). A ribbon of highway threading shoreline villages, and far to the north, I was told in my dream, there was a magic valley where secrets were kept. "What island are we on?" I asked my husband, as if local geography had rearranged itself to such an extent that this was now the case. "What trail?" I wanted to go there, I knew, and one day I would. And even within the dream I was reminded of Kalalau Valley.

At seminal times in my life I've spent time on Kauai, the northernmost and geologically oldest island in the Hawaiian archipelago, where my aunt Michaela lives. In the far north of that island, accessible only by helicopter, boat, or hazardous ten-mile trail, there is a valley called Kalalau. Part of a state park now, it has at times been inhabited by hippie squatters. There's so much wild food there one need never starve, and the forest is so impenetrable it's easy to build a shelter the rangers will never find, as of course, one isn't actually supposed to live there. Michaela, who squatted for a time in Kalalau with her hippie sea captain partner, teaching herself celestial navigation during her stay, once told me she'd heard Kalalau means *Place of the Cleansing Light*. If I look it up in my pocket Hawaiian dictionary, it isn't listed.

I never found any magic archives in Kalalau, except that the concrete experience of the place is a bit like opening a forgotten box full of gorgeous treasure. Walking that trail always felt timeless. It's barely maintained, and the hiker is threatened at many turns by landslides ready to pitch her into the surf hundreds of meters below. I most often hiked alone. I stopped to eat lunch and watched the wild goats play. I wondered whether I would lose my footing and crash to the rocks below. I wondered whether I'd encounter a crazy person on my hike. (I did, once, but that's another story to be told elsewhere.) And sometimes, sitting on the beach near a cave, eating a dinner of wild crafted and lengthily boiled taro, looking at the stars, and swapping stories with squatters and fellow campers, well, maybe it's a speculative writer's thing.

Kathleen Ann Gooanan, best known for the wonderfully jazz spirited *Queen City Jaxa*, has also written about Kalalau Valley, as I've just discovered via the wonders of Google, and about *Dreams of the Sea*. In her travel piece on Kalalau, she describes, among many other things, an Amazonian surfer who used to swim to the valley from Hana Point with supplies in buckets (the version I heard) or, in Gooanan's version, towing her children on a surfboard. We might think the story of this woman is apocryphal, or a composite, but I met Belle (not her real name) the first time I hiked to Kalalau, as a teenager way back in the 1970s. I was on my way home to Kapaa, but spending the night with a friend at the trailhead treeshouse community of Taylor Camp. There was Belle at a party; she was a tough sort, and didn't want to chat with me, much. She was already a legend, but it was plain to see that while her life had been remarkable it also hadn't been easy, and I didn't really hold her surferness against her. Why shouldn't she spurn the social advances of yet another young hiker who had heard her name around a campfire. People are still talking about her, according to Gooanan; she was a real-life girl Indiana Jones. One wonders what Belle has made of her life since. If she were ever to write an autobiographical novel, most would think she'd made it all up, that her stories couldn't possibly be true.

Gooanan has a Hawaii novel called *The Bones of Time* I haven't read, but now have to add to my list, and I have a near-future story that takes place there (but not in Kalalau) called "Gone with the Sea." It first appeared in *Tesseract 8*, and describes, among other things, bodysurfing at Hana and the ancient Hawaiians' methods of shrimp

farming, as well as the biotech food industry. Kauai has become a locus for genetically engineered food, including shrimp. I wonder what Ekkumenical observer Sutty would make of that? Just as in *The Telling*, she'd try hard not to judge, as all her training taught her, but I think it would make her sad, and she'd have a better time hiking to Kalalau and listening to stories.

In the northern village of Okat-Okat at an evening exercise class resembling 'T'ai Chi that takes place in the community centre, Sutty watches while a differently abled young man suddenly climbs steps that aren't there. He is gently led back down, and it's barely mentioned again, until the last line in the book.

Footsteps in the air.

Why always the north? What secret story is kept safe there, far from prying eyes? The Dreaming and *The Telling* are kin, and both urge me to ask these questions. What island are we on? What trail are we on? How do we get to the secret valley?

Kalalau is a place where the unbelievable seems possible, just like Okat-Okat in *The Telling*, where there are people capable of climbing steps made of air, or the native culture on *Tyrannid*, where there are hekel who can control the weather, or alimādzī who Dream

the future. In the native medicine wheel, north is a direction of sadness and defeat, winter and blue. But it is also representative of waiting, and maybe that's what we're all doing, waiting for the time it's safe to open our own secret libraries.

May it come soon.

Afterword

kala.lau. n. A variety of taro, corm white, yielding gray poi; perhaps originated in Ka-lalau

So the other definition was hippie apocrypha after all, but Belle wasn't. Michaela called yesterday and I asked, "Whatever became of Belle?" I was told she works in a surf shop, and is a grandmother now, and that once, many years ago, she rode through Hanalei on the back of a white horse, stone drunk and naked. I still say she was a real-life girl Indiana Jones with physical skills to match, as well as raising kids on a squatter's budget. Here's to you, Belle, or as Hunter S. Thompson once said, everyone wants to write a great novel; far fewer have the courage to live one. Doing both is the real trick. ▶

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The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories by Christopher Booker

London and New York: Continuum, 2004; \$34.95/£25.00 hc; 728 pages

reviewed by Graham Sleight

This is—there's no way around it—a very odd book indeed. Christopher Booker is a British journalist, a small-c conservative mainly known for his role in founding the satirical magazine *Private Eye* in the 1960s and subsequently for acid commentary on a range of subjects, most recently the bureaucracy of the European Union. He's not someone you'd expect to be producing a work on the deep structure of story, comprising 700+ pages of small print (or, indeed, to say, as he does, that he's spent 34 years writing it). He makes only passing reference to literary criticism of the last century and almost none to the more recent body of literary theory. He has, in short, the autodidact's fervor.

Which, I should say, is just fine by me. Having been put off the study of English literature at age 16 by a succession of loazy teachers, I have always felt myself to be without many formal academic tools for reading (and, latterly, for writing about reading). If, to coin a Robinson Crusoe metaphor, something that looks like a useful tool washes up on the shore I'll grab it; but I'm miles away from whoever's producing the jetsam. Booker's approach is to apply quite a limited set of tools to a huge field with a great deal of passion. Despite having significant gaps in his argument, there's never a question that he is saying precisely what he wants to in the way that he wants to. You may throw this book across the room a lot, but you'll probably pick it up again.

Booker arranges his argument in four parts. The first lays out his main thesis: that all stories follow one of seven basic plots. These are tagged as Overcoming the Monster, Rags to Riches, the Quest, Voyage and Return, Comedy, Tragedy, and Rebirth. Thus, for instance, the first type gives the deep structure of both *Beowulf* and *Jaws*, and both works derive their power from their use of this archetype. This is, of course, an argument influenced by Jungian psychology, and Booker acknowledges his debt to both Jung and to Jungian-influenced theories of story such as Joseph Campbell's "monomyth" (12–13) He has to admit, of course, that "[not] every story in the world falls neatly and exclusively into one of these categories." (215) He allows both "specialized" plots—for instance detective stories or creation myths—and the possibility that a story may derive its structure from more than one of his seven elemental structures. (Is *The Lord of the Rings*, for instance, a Quest or a Voyage and Return? Booker's argument is in fact that it embodies all seven plots; cf. page 321.) All of which is fair enough, and the sort of concession that anyone involved in this sort of enterprise has to make: Any classification of a large and diffuse field like story must always admit and account for boundary cases. The classification, like a map, offers a trade-off. It makes the terrain it describes more graspable at

the expense of some of the terrain's complexity. So arguments against Booker of the form "Well, X says that there are actually only Y plots" seem to me unhelpful, like arguing against a map for the color of its contour lines. The interesting question is what, having drawn the map, Booker chooses to do with it. What, in other words, does the increase in explanatory power of his structure buy him?

The second part, "The Complete Happy Ending," gives some answers and takes us further into Jungian territory. To paraphrase a sprawling argument: Every story has implicit in it what would constitute fulfillment. The story need not achieve this "cosmic happy ending"—indeed tragedies, by definition, will not—but readers will experience their failure to do so as an absence, as a lack. Booker couches his description of this ideal (274) in terms of its effect on the "kingdom" of the story: that it should be justly ruled, orderly, loving and so forth. But in his discussions of individual stories, he makes it clear that this is isomorphic with fulfillment for the hero: that he will gain the hand of the princess, come to a fully self-realized sense of himself and so forth. So Frodo, for instance, is marked as a tragic hero at the end of *The Lord of the Rings* by his failure to marry. (321) Though perhaps differing in the details, this is standard Jung/Campbell stuff, and a good deal could have been pruned from Booker's text here. There are, for instance, protracted discussions of the "Light" and "Dark" figures that tend to occur in stories that belabor the obvious. But, up to this point, you'll agree with Booker to roughly the same extent that you find Campbell's monomyth a useful tool.

Part three, the self-describing "Missing the Mark," is where many readers will begin projectile usage of this volume. Booker thinks that in the last two hundred years, something has gone wrong with stories: In Jungian terms, the Ego has taken over from the Self. (The Self is the part of the psyche most engaged with the collective unconscious, while the Ego is the more individual and, um, selfish.) The seven basic plots have tended to become perverted into either "dark" or "sentimental" versions; concern for the kingdom has been replaced by concern for the individual. Here as elsewhere, Booker spends most of his time in detailed discussion of a range of stories to illustrate his ideas. Perhaps his fiercest polemic is against Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* (432–438), "the greatest monument to human egotism in the history of story" (438), although he's also savage about James Joyce's *Ulysses* ("an exact reflection of what happens when . . . the complexities of human love are reduced to no more than the physicality of the sexual drive . . . a sterile dead end" [466]) and D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* ("In trying to evangelize for his belief that physical sexuality between a man and a woman can stand for the totality of

love, Lawrence has sought to defy the archetypes. And the archetypes have won" (470)).

It's not unreasonable, therefore, to suggest that Booker views the foregrounding of stories' sexual content as symptomatic of a deep ill in Western society. The alternative "progressive" narrative is utterly scorned, as in his description of the *Lady Chatterley's Lover* trial (470-1). To put it at its most modest, the progressive argument is that the twentieth century saw a gradual realization that sexuality is too important to be concealed behind a row of asterisks. To attempt to deal with it in stories or elsewhere by sublimating it away (the hero kisses the princess and everything else is taken as read) is to efface the deepest part of us. Of course, this has costs: bad sex scenes, for instance, and new possibilities for exploitative or manipulative stories. But storytellers operate, presumably, on the basis that it's better to talk about important stuff than not to.

Booker's views on sex sit within the context of a larger distaste for the "progressive," which will be the defining feature of his work for many readers. In a late chapter entitled "The Age of Loki," he charts the steady descent of Western culture from 1900 to date. A sample quotation:

Even more than in its earlier manifestations, the new [1980s] feminism was concerned not with promoting the importance of "femininity" but the reverse. It despised the "feminine" values of feeling and intuition. . . . Despite their contempt for men and for the "values of Father," the feminists had become dominated by the animus: that masculine component in a woman's psyche which can give her the strength and rational intelligence which is necessary for psychological balance, but which, if it is allowed to override her femininity, renders her negative, hard, and combative. (688)

Elsewhere, phrases like "political correctness," "new woman," or "gender stereotyping" appear in scare quotes to indicate just how far they are from any actual reality that we might encounter in reading stories about heroes and princesses. Booker's passages on feminism—see, for instance, his footnoted broadside against Germaine Greer on page 688—are as partial and daft as anything I've read. So he has to do a certain amount of rhetorical shimmying when a story comes along featuring a strong heroine and no hero. His section on "The Heroine as Hero" treats in detail just one work, Thomas Harris's *The Silence of the Lambs*, which he simply misreads. He later summarizes his view as: "To defy the unconscious pull of the archetypes is not easy. We saw, for instance, how in *The Silence of the Lambs*, the attempt to give the archetypal hero-role to a 'new woman' was subtly undermined when the power of the repulsively dark but devilishly charming and clever male villain proved too much for her. She ended up being outwitted and allowing him to escape." (690) This reading substantiates his prejudices, but misrepresents both the book and film versions. Clarice Starling does not cause or allow Hannibal Lecter's escape in any material sense. Lecter is put in a position where he can escape by the grasping ambition of the (male) asylum director, who also provides the tools for his escape. But equally, Booker is someone who can say with a straight face of *Alien* that "In a final shoot-out, worthy of any male hero, [Ripley] manages in the nick of time to blast the monster into space. The whole point of her part in the story was that nothing about it was distinctively feminine." (486)

Any critics who create a theoretical structure for themselves are going to test it by reading works against it and observing how well they fit the structure. This leads often to the skewed or partial reading of works, and we get the spectacle of critics sawing off the limbs of books to cram them into the box they've made. But because Booker's structure of story is based on a prescriptive view of what a person should be, he winds up inferring from it a world-view so narrow, punitive, and illiberal that I found myself looking in disbelief at passage after passage. It may just be me, for instance, but could Booker have some specific social group in mind when he writes:

A man weak in his masculinity, a "mother's boy," cannot develop either side of his personality properly. Taken over by his "negative anima," he becomes, as we say, effeminate. His capacity for feeling may remain self-centred and sentimental,

while his repressed masculinity tends to assert itself in an "inferior" way, making him feline and petulant. (561)

And no, before you ask, Booker really doesn't like *The Wizard of Oz*. It shows an "infantile Technicolor fantasy-land" and "sentimental pseudo-optimism." (667)

I've hardly touched on Booker's cramping adherence to Western (that is, European or North American) stories; on his almost total ignorance of women writers after Austen, Shelley, and Eliot; or the either-you-are-with-us-or-against-us tone of much of his argument. You don't have to be Germaine Greer—and I believe I'm not—to recoil from much of what he writes.

Before this gets too much like fish-in-a-barrel criticism, let me try to be fair to Booker's argument in part three. His dislike of the progressive sits in the context of his dislike of "realism" as the mimetic novel has used it in the last two centuries. A key passage here comes in his discussion of Chekhov's *Irony*. This play, he says, like Chekhov's others, embodies

a little world not quite like anything ever seen in storytelling before. No-one is presented as particularly dark: not even the heartless but self-despising Ivanov. . . . But at the same time none of the other characters is particularly light either. All are essentially trapped in the same moral twilight. Each is isolated and shut off from everyone else, because they are all to a greater or lesser extent bound up in their own egotism. (427)

To which the response is, well, isn't that what life is like? Aren't we all far more trapped in our skulls than we would like? Aren't moral absolutes harder and harder to grasp as one gets older? And, if so, isn't Booker's prescription for what stories should be—with its easily identifiable Light and Dark figures, its reductive simplicities about achieving selfhood—simply too neat to be believed? One goes to writers like Chekhov for a sense of the complexity of being in the world, for a sensibility that knows that not every story ends with a death or a kiss. Of course, mimetic literature has its own dead ends: the endless campus and Hampstead novels, the fatalism of style over content, the aimless plotless meanderings to which Michael Chabon has been administering a thorough kicking in his recent McSweeney's editorials. Which brings me to a question that, I guess, NYRSF readers may ask about Booker's work: What does he have to say about sf and fantasy?

Almost nothing is the answer. As I've noted, he does talk about *The Lord of the Rings* at some length, and he isn't without interesting things to say. And he is reasonably enlightened—and certainly not snobbish—about a few genre films, most obviously *Star Wars* and *The Terminator*. But that, and a few passing mentions of Harry Potter and John Wyndham, is pretty much it. Which is rather a shame, since written sf and fantasy of the last century provides a counterargument to a great deal of what he claims. You could argue, in fact, that the history of written sf and fantasy can be seen as an attempt to synthesize Booker's virtues of archetypal stories with genre frameworks that we as readers can believe in. To reel off a random list of ten, he would have found a great deal of relevant material in Gene Wolfe's *The Book of the New Sun*, Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End*, Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*, Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, John Crowley's *Little, Big*, G. K. Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday*, Theodore Sturgeon's *More than Human*, William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, Samuel Delany's *Nova*, and Alfred Bester's *Tiger! Tiger!* (published in the U. S. as *The Stars My Destination*). None of these are exactly obscure titles and a few moments' investigation would have uncovered them. But there's no way to go on in this vein without doing the everyone-ignores-us-in-genre mantra, which NYRSF readers may have heard once or twice before.

The hardy reader who makes it through part three comes to the concluding part four, "Why we tell stories." This is relatively brief, sums up the argument, and exposes the weaknesses of Booker's approach as well as its strengths. Paraphrasing him again: We tell and listen to stories because we wish to hear about exemplars of who we are and what we might be. That is, of course, "what we might be" in strongly Jungian terms. We might aspire to be heroes or princesses,

to come into a selfhood wherein our masculine and feminine selves are appropriately in balance. It's at about this point that you start realizing the perils of being an autodidact, of having nothing but your own structure to rely on. There are so many other ways of thinking about stories. There's the Freudian, which Booker dismisses early on in favor of Jung; there's the anthropological, but Booker seems not to know anyone in that field after J. G. Frazer and certainly not folks with funny names like Levi-Strauss; there's even, heaven help us, the flaying of stories into "arcs" and "beats" by screenplay theoreticians like Syd Field and Robert McKee.

But Booker abjures all these, and the abiding impressions of this book are of loneliness and intensity. The loneliness comes from the

sense that the author thinks the world is going downhill, that it has been for a long time, and that the circle of civilized discourse is getting ever more threatened. The intensity resides in his adherence—which is in the end quite moving—to the thrill of story, to describing what happens the first time you read *Hamlet* or *The Odyssey*. You simply can't go back again, though, no matter how many words you pile up. Booker wants storytelling to recover its innocence, to make readers or the world younger than we are. But Booker's idea of the past is just another story, a lie we tell ourselves to keep us warm at night. ▶

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Brian Yeomans Real Editing™ for Real Readers™

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June 12, 2002

Dear Mr. Wolf:

Thank you for your payment of \$200. You will find enclosed detailed editorial comments on your manuscript *WIZARD KNIGHT* by a Real Editor™. We hope you find these comments useful and wish you every success in your literary career.

Sincerely,
Georgette Wilson
Office Manager

Clinton Cabot
Reading Editor, Real Editors, Inc.
c/o PO Box 120457
NY, NY 10044

Dear Mr. Wolf:

Thank you for the opportunity to read your manuscript entitled "Wizard Knight." You will find comments on specific passages scattered through the manuscript. In this letter, I'd like to give you some overall comments on the project.

Gene, I think this book has a basic problem—it's an Arthurian fantasy, but it is told from a male perspective and doesn't foreground the romantic elements. Arthurian fantasy is chick lit, Gene! Ever since that "Mists of Avalon" thing, it's been all about Guinevere and illicit love and powerful women—and here you are with a book where the female characters are all secondary, and where nobody sleeps with anybody they aren't supposed to! I think this is going to make marketing difficult.

You seem to have a basic sense of what a fantasy series should have—knights, elves, dragons, unicorns, ogres, gods, magic, etc. But you don't seem to have the right ideas about how some of them work. Dragons are supposed to be sympathetic, like "Pern"—not like Hieronymus Bosch or something. And elves are supposed to be old and wise, unless you are specifically doing a "Midsummer's Night Dream" schtick. And what is this pet ogre thing? They aren't supposed to be ongoing characters—they're something the main character slays! I like the unicorn though. The "Michael" bit was also good. Angels are a little overdone right now, but they are still a selling

point. More angels!

Also, you can't seem to decide on a myth structure to follow. One moment the main character is Arthur, at another Gawain, at a third Odin or somebody like that. I was confused; I went looking for my old "Western Mythologies" class textbook, but I guess I must have sold it. The point is, if you make your readers think a lot like that, they won't like it. Fantasy is supposed to be relaxing, Gene.

I liked this whole worlds above worlds and people being gods to those below them. You should develop that a bit, make it more spiritual and empowering. If you really wanted to go with it, you could go the L. Ron Hubbard route—"You ARE a GOD—realize your powers NOW!" Something to think about.

What is this "can vs. may" thing? Are you trying to say that a precise use of language is part of being a mature adult? Or that it is important to know the difference between permission and ability? Either way, the average reader will so not want to hear that.

Finally, while there is some good action in here, you have too much of a tendency to tell about things after the fact and not show them. "Show, don't tell," isn't that what all the writing workshops say? For instance, the battle on the ship with the pirates. And where you do talk about things, you summarize. I think it is the whole "letter to my brother" conceit—it forces you to a certain distance. I suppose it justifies your careful use of language, but do fantasy readers really want to think about language and ideas, or do they want to see blood and guts on the page?

Part of this is your habit to have these big gab-fests where the action and plot is moved forward by semi-formal conversations between groups of characters. For example, the council between Lord Beel, Schildstarr, Thiazil, Able, etc. in the giants' castle. Do readers really want witty repartee, prophetic comments, and character insight instead of blood and romance? Well, that's what you give them.

In conclusion, I think that "Wizard Knight" does show some promise, and with a bit of rewriting could be professionally published. Please do consider sending the rewrite back to Real Editors for another review.

Sincerely,
Clinton Cabot
A Real Editor™ ▶

lost boy lost girl by Peter Straub

New York: Random House, 2003; \$24.95 hc; 281 pages

In the Night Room by Peter Straub

New York: Random House, 2004; \$21.95 hc; 330 pages

reviewed by John Clute

Goosed by a very nearly literal tornado out of Oz, a very nearly literal protagonist named Willy Bryce Patrick out of a very nearly literal book called *In the Night Room* falls down a very nearly literal rabbit hole out of Alice halfway through Peter Straub's seventeenth novel, a metafiction with real toads inside it which is also called *In the Night Room*. We are in Wonderland, and it hurts. Night Room, and the earlier *lost boy lost girl*, which Night Room encompasses and eviscerates, are novels of horror, but Night Room is also a novel about horror. *lost boy lost girl*, though, is a fine-tuned genuine example of that uber-genre one might call the Bound Fantastic, a term that arguably encompasses horror, dark fantasy, weird fiction, the Gothic, strange tales and supernatural fiction in general; and which may be described as that group of stories in which the real world reveals fantastically to the protagonist (and to us) its true nature, reveals to us the true face of the planet since Time began in 1764 or thereabouts. If there is a portal in any iteration of the Bound Fantastic (there are portals in both novels under review), it is a portal to Room 101; better perhaps to call it a cloaca. If there is an Eden (both Straub novels terminate in deeply dubious Edens), it is the White Hotel just after Babi Yar—I'm referring here to D. M. Thomas's *The White Hotel* (1981), one of the greatest novels about the twentieth century, whose impact has been obscured by the eclipse of Thomas's later career—better perhaps not to call it Eden, so call it Aftermath.

lost boy lost girl, read as a singleton, resolves its complexities in a Laocoön-like stasis, a moment of pure bondage; *In the Night Room*, on the other hand, turns into a Wonderland tale—a category of story spun from rules which may be refuted only if the story told is not bound-fantastic (Alice can refute the Queen; K cannot refute his Trial)—and plays cruelly on the chance that, despite all the signs to the contrary, Willy Bryce Patrick (who is a puppet governed by cruel rules of narrative) may be able to act like Alice; that she may be able to refute the hell prepared for her, in all "innocence," by her author. Of the two books, the latter is by far the more horrific, perhaps because Wonderland tales die (in Willy's case pretty literally) those who cannot escape their terms. Bound-fantastic forms of the Wonderland tale are nightmares of totalitarianism; they are godgames without exit—which is why Vladimir Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading* (1938), whose protagonist levitates to Eden on the final page, is not a novel of the Bound Fantastic. Wonderland tales are exactly writer's tales, for what happens in them is a visible iteration of instructions written down by these small gods. This is all cruel enough; but the deep cruelty of *In the Night Room* is only unveiled when the reader understands that a real toad is going to die in Wonderland, that Willy Bryce Patrick is going to die at the hand of Peter Straub.

It takes some time to get there, to arrive at the No Exit heart of the book. Readers of some of Straub's previous novels—specifically *Koko* (1988), *Mystery*, (1990) and *The Throat* (1993)—will recognize Tim Underhill, who is either the protagonist or deeply implicated in all three, and who is the protagonist (usually first-person) of the new set; these readers may begin (and even finish) *lost boy lost girl* with a sense that the Underhill they know from way back is this Underhill too, and that they can trust the narrator of this new set to convey to us and to embody, as he does in the earlier volumes, a relatively uncontentious dialogue with the nature of reality and the problematics of narrative. Because Underhill has been a moderately reliable narrator in the earlier books he's fronted, his earlier readers may be misled here: because all Straub seems to require of readers of *lost boy lost girl* is a certain distrust of Underhill's big brusque penetrating guy narrative voice. Readers new to Underhill, however, may detect something rather more ominous in the odd jerks and repetitions that echo through his recounting of a deep tragedy which has afflicted his own family, clear hints that he may be so deeply wounded by the story he is writing down that he has to make it up.

lost boy lost girl was published in 2003 and has been widely reviewed, but it still may be worth outlining here. Tim Underhill's brother Philip's wife has killed herself in Millhaven (Straub's frequently-visited version of Milwaukee), where Underhill himself grew up. His brother's son Mark is now at risk from a serial killer who has been copycatting an earlier serial killer named Joseph Kalendar, whose Bad Place house virtually abides the Underhill family home. But copycatting is only one form of possession; Underhill himself begins to get sightings of (or fabricates from memories of a painting by Magritte) a ghost figure that threatens his family and who (the magisterially decides) must be the unannounced vengeful ghost of Joseph Kalendar. Only slowly is the reader allowed to understand that this apparition may be a consolation of art, a magicking artifact of story; that the ghost may be Underhill's own possession.

There is, to be fair, a great deal to escape: the suicide of Mark's mother, who has been savaged by a guilt more gnawing than ghosts; and the real threat to Mark of a real figure looming out of the dreadful real day. More or less simultaneously with the appearance of "Kalendar," Underhill begins to work out (with the help of the detective protagonist of *Mystery*) the identity of the copycat killer, who has almost certainly (in scenes we must imagine, as the author of *lost boy lost girl*, who is Tim Underhill, cannot bear to) already killed Mark. In the story he tells us instead, the story that the novel ostensibly tells us, something else happens. In scenes written in the omniscient voice common to most novels, though the reader will soon detect Underhill's own possessing hand, Kalendar's ghost daughter, whom he had tortured to death, saves Mark from a fate too horrible to imagine, by taking him to a different level of reality. The novel closes in a state of denial.

This gap between the admitted/admissible articulation of the story of escape, and what the reader comes to understand has actually happened, generates (as Straub clearly intends) a deep readerly dis-ease. There is a kind of queasiness to the tale, not dissimilar to the almost visceral distaste readers feel for the protagonist of Henry James's *The Sacred Fount* (1901), who—with far less human excuse than the protagonist of "The Turn of the Screw" (1898), who in any case may be genuinely haunted—creates around him a sickened world whose protagonists' motives are sickened, and their actions sickening. By taking possession of Mark, Underhill has made of him a creature in a book he is writing, while scrambling over the real boy's terrible last real days, and denying his death. So *lost boy lost girl* is not only the story of a tragedy, not only the depiction of a deeply evil man (the copycat killer), but is also a depiction of Tim Underhill (who, we learn in the sequel, duly publishes a novel called *lost boy lost girl*) as a dictator. The tragedy of the book is the death of Mark, who dies a terrible death in the mundane world that real people die in; the horror—the formatting of a lesson in the mind's making of the world, a lesson that will generate the engineered sacrifice at the heart of *In the Night Room*—is Tim Underhill's *lost boy lost girl*.

Peter Straub has never been a writer who reads slow, and *lost boy lost girl* pulls the reader through at a strong unfaltering allegro; but the pace of *In the Night Room* is something extraordinary in a tale of horror. It is a scherzo, too fast for most of the affects of Afflict Horror to take hold. So the telling of this tale of murder (Tim Underhill's murder of his creation) skims the merciless abyss at its heart. Night Room starts off in *medias res*, exuberantly and confidently, and accelerates steadily, then nearly bounces itself apart in an abrupt ending where, with a hearty false semblance of closure, Tim Underhill tells us he has come through, and that he has chosen to run away to the real world, in closing sentences uncannily echoing of the famous closing sentences of Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884):

I want no part of the ideal [Tim tells us after receiving an unwished-for message from the ghost of his dead sister, whom he then shows aside], I want nothing to do with it. I've seen what it does to people. Give me the messy, imperfect world any day.

Sure, Tim. Dream on.

Clearly, Peter Straub is not yet finished with his alter ego. Readers of the two volumes here on review may well suspect that a further installment teasingly telegraphed at the end of *In the Night Room*—its name would be *Kalendar's Realm*, a realm like the Tibetan Bardo, a realm like Hell—may actually appear and dump Underhill out of the frying pan into the fire, out of which we may at last see him emerge, his hands no longer stained with ink blood. Because it is certainly the case that, despite his shouted avowals of good health, Tim has not emerged from *In the Night Room* in his right mind. To see where he has ended up, we need to go back.

The story begins in the third-person omniscient, but no reader of *lost boy lost girl* will be fooled: *In the Night Room*, we immediately expect to be another book written by Tim Underhill. Every word we read will be his. But almost immediately, this understanding is shaken. After a tiny first chapter, in which we find Tim Underhill, in some distress of mind, returning to his Manhattan loft on Grand Street (which is the name of a magazine Tim Underhill might write for, and it's where George Gershwin grew up), we are suddenly introduced to Willy Bryce Patrick, well-known author of the Newbery Award-winning children's novel, *In the Night Room*. She is in a parking lot in New Jersey, fighting an obsessional need to explore an abandoned warehouse in case her murdered young daughter is there, alive, begging for release. Willy is terribly troubled by this obsession, which she knows to be delusional, but:

Like all serious compulsions, hers seemed both a necessary part of her character and to have been wished upon her by some indifferent deity. . . . Willy had the feeling . . . that she had been all along meant to come across this building.

Meanwhile, Tim is receiving e-mails from dead friends and colleagues, demanding that some balance be rectified. And he sees the ghost of his eight-year-old dead sister, the Beatrice of his childhood, who has preceded him into Wonderland. He meets a very intense book collector named Jasper Dan Kohle (not realizing that this name is an obvious anagram of Joseph Kalendar), who has him sign several copies of the newly published *lost boy lost girl*, explaining that he buys multiple copies in search of "the real book . . . The one you were supposed to write, only you screwed it up."

Back in New Jersey, Willy continues to try to live her hugely difficult life as a young widow (her husband having been murdered at the same time as their daughter) who has agreed to marry her dangerous, domineering suitor, whom the reader soon suspects of complicity in the double murder. But this world, however terrible it is, soon begins to dissolve. After a short interjected passage, in which a "minor deity" named Merlin D'Luth (an anagram of Tim Underhill) tells us that he is about to "advance the dear girl's [Willy's] progress toward her great challenge, which is of recognition," we begin to realize that something truly terrible is happening to her. Parts of the days are beginning to disappear, and when we understand that what is disappearing is that which most novelists normally elide—details of transit from one significant venue to another—we begin to understand (this reader felt it in the pit of his stomach, having already fallen in love with her) that Willy Bryce Patrick is a character in a novel, almost certainly called *In the Night Room*, by Tim Underhill; and that if she is experiencing these terrifying gaps, *he has written her terror*. He is playing a godgame: he means his character to suffer bowel-shaking terror at the thought that she might be a character in a book, a Dictate of Story. (But after all, what's to worry, she *is* just a character in a book. Authors can do what they want with their *creatures*.)

Willy flees her maniacal fiancé, landing in the Manhattan of the book she is trapped in, which has told her to do this. At the same time, in the real world (i.e., the world of a book we are reading called *In the Night Room*, which may have a normal contiguity with the world in which we are reading a book called *In the Night Room*; or not), Tim

Underhill is giving a reading. Outside the weather is terrible. He asks his audience to tap their feet three times in order to calm the storm, a reference to Oz; but at the same time he mentions Alice. Which is enough. The texts marry in a calamity of thunder, and Willy falls down the rabbit hole from her world into this. She and Tim lock eyes. When he recognizes her, terror afflicts him, but also love—not only has he created her out of the seamy cloth of his creative being, but now that he has met her he realizes that she is almost supernaturally attractive as a person: thin, graceful, funny, hungry, open, touching, touchable, sexually on fire. She is, indeed, the wholeset and healthiest and sexiest and funniest female character Peter Straub has ever created. (She is, frankly, a bit more than it is easy to believe Merlin D'Luth/Tim Underhill could have created. But then, neither can Tim himself quite believe he's wholly responsible for crafting her.)

The pace quickens. Thugs in her fiancé's employ have also fallen down the rabbit hole, and are in pursuit. Underhill needs to get Willy to Millhaven, where bleak intuitions about himself, as well as the emails from beyond, tell him he must take her, and maybe sacrifice her, in order that he be absolved of a sin he has committed: As he tells us himself in the previous novel, he had arbitrarily assumed that Joseph Kalendar was incapable of preventing himself from murdering his daughter; she is, in fact, alive. And Willy—still ignorant at this point that she is a fictional being—finds that she is becoming ravenous, that unless she eats almost constantly she will turn into something like "light," rather like the Cheshire Cat. There are car chases. Tim and Willy make love in a motel (Straub handles this superbly); she thinks of Tim as godlike, she tells him he comes like Zeus. She says to him, correctly, "I am yours."

Finally Tim tells her what she is in the real world: a marionette of the words he has written—a body English of the Bound Fantastic. He tells her that she is sentences he wrote. He does not mention here that she is also sentences he is continuing to write, in the journals and third-person passages that make up this part of *In the Night Room*, the novel (we must assume) that we are now reading; nor does he tell her that she has begun to act in ways he had not written down. That she has become autodidactic, that she seems briefly to verge on becoming a character in a different book, a fantasy of escape from prison, a tale of the Free Fantastic. . . . His silence, which Straub does not have him explain (we must never forget, in this most intricate metafiction, that Underhill is himself as crasable as Willy), either derives from compunction, or cowardice, or a dark opportunism, or all of these. Her response to all that he does tell her is heartbreaking enough.

It is at this point that *In the Night Room* begins to shake itself apart, or (maybe more simply) it's at this point that Tim Underhill begins to shake apart. The copy of *In the Night Room* in my hands in early 2005 may be as real as physics allows, but Tim Underhill has fallen fathoms deep into indeterminacy. The final pages of the novel see a loathsome embodiment of Kalendar seem to gain what he needs from Underhill, at the cost of the seeming dissolution of the Dictate of Story: for Willy is brought to the Night Room, the torture chamber we visit in the previous novel, where she is tossed into hasty, ill-contrived chases, and leaves the book. It may be the case that this ending seems hasty and ill-contrived simply because—since Willy is the heart of *In the Night Room*, since she is the *anima* of the perfect Book we will never read—her dismissal is just crippling. As a reader of the book we do have in our mortal hands, I can attest to missing her spirit.

More mundanely, the last pages of *In the Night Room* may seem choppy because Tim Underhill has been too radically shamed and terrorized to make up a good ending. It is, after all, "his" book, and he does survive, out there in "the messy, imperfect world." But the book remains. It is superb, unrelenting, fast and loose. It is the most joyful book Peter Straub has ever written; it is also the saddest, the most terrifying. Because it's not simply about torture, about Tim Underhill's creation of a soul to sacrifice. In the end, the book bears his ineradicable smell. In the end, despite his attempts to gain redemption from his own rotten godgame, *In the Night Room* is the torture. ►

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Fantasy and Tradition, or, Hey, Is That My Genre You're Stepping On?

(This essay was originally delivered as a speech at the Philadelphia Free Library, October 25, 2004.)

I.

I have not yet read Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell*, though I would like to, and I have heard very good reports about it. But I must take exception to the ignorant review in, alas, The Philadelphia Inquirer, which said, in effect, hey, prior to this fantasy was read by geeks with tattoos and piercings and a Walkman blaring in both ears, but now, for the first time ever (or nearly so), here is a fantasy novel that is LITERATURE and may be read by adults.

I believe this would be news to the readers of Tolkien and C. S. Lewis in the 1950s, to readers of Lord Dunsany and James Branch Cabell in the '10s and '20s, to readers (or spectators) of William Shakespeare's archetypal fantasy, *The Tempest*, circa 1615, or even the audience for Lucius Apuleius's *The Golden Ass* in the reign of Marcus Aurelius.

The secret has been out for some time: Fantasy is not a new form of literature. If we define fantasy as fiction about fantastic events that the audience reads with the understanding that it is all made up, a fable or adventure yarn or whatever, then we cut ourselves free from tangled questions about *The Iliad* and *The Book of Exodus* and *Gilgamesh* and all that—narratives that were intended to be believed—and still see that fantasy has been around for a long time. *The Golden Ass*, written somewhere around A. D. 160–180, is not only self-consciously made-up, but is almost postmodern metafiction, devoting a good deal of its energies to questions of what is real and what is not, how do we tell the difference, and the matter of the unreliable narrator. It is a vast liar-paradox of a book, whose first line of dialogue may be translated from baroque, Clark-Ashton-Smith-y Latin as, "Stop all this outrageous lying!" The tone is then set by the story of a traveller who, with a companion, stopped at an inn in witch-haunted Thessaly and was horrified to awaken in the middle of the night to behold a gaggle of levitating witches, like a sinister black cloud floating in through the window to hover above his roommate's bed. They slit the poor fellow's throat, reach down inside, snatch out his heart, and leave a sponge in its place. As in any nightmare, the worst thing happens next. The witches discover that the traveller is observing them. Outraged, they flip over his bed, urinate on him, and leave.

The following morning, the traveller, smelling somewhat the worse for wear one imagines, sneaks out very early and saddles his horse. No one will believe his story. He'll surely be arrested for murder. But who should he meet in the stable, but his friend, apparently alive and well.

They set out on their journey. The tension between reality and unreality—Was it a dream? Is the man still alive or some kind of ghost?—will be familiar to any reader of Robert Ackman or Philip K. Dick. It becomes unbearable until the two of them stop by a stream to drink, and the sponge gets soaked, falls out, and the companion dies. Wilder and wilder episodes pile on top of one another as the book progresses. The main story is about how Lucius, the narrator, identified with the author (who was in real life tried and acquitted for witchcraft—his defense speech still exists), visits a Thessalian household, seduces the maid, learns from her that the mistress anoints herself with magic oil at night and turns into an owl, and resolves to try this himself. But he screws it up and is transformed, quite deservedly into an ass. He spends the rest of the book trying to regain human shape. When at last he is able to convince someone of his plight, this doesn't help. He becomes a novelty. A depraved woman wants to have sex with him and arranges for him to be brought to her perfumed, richly decorated bedroom, until at last—if you will excuse the phrase—climax of the book the ass-man leaps out the window, runs down to the beach, calls on the goddess Isis, has a vision and gets religion in the last chapter, which of course makes the entire book, with its many frivolous, terrifying, and racy episodes entirely moral, edifying, and worthy of the time of serious-minded persons. Daniel Defoe employed a similar narrative strategy in *Moll Flanders*

sixteen centuries later.

In other words, *The Golden Ass* is a comic-philosophical fantasy novel, which has a great deal in common with, say, the works of Terry Pratchett. Of course such works do not spring fully-grown from the forehead of a single writer. Undoubtedly Apuleius was drawing on earlier examples, possibly a vast literature of ancient fantasy novels, now entirely lost. A tradition.

This will come as a shock only to that reviewer in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*.

What may come as a shock to general readers—and a lot of literature professors—who have never thought much about it is this: *There is no nonsense fiction*, at least not anymore. Books are published and sold according to two strategies. Either it is a *brand-name* book, identifiable as a Kurt Vonnegut novel or a Stephen King novel or a Thomas Pynchon novel, or whatever, or else it is a genre book, meaning that it is published and sold on the basis, not of the author's name, but on what kind of book it is. A mystery. A western. Science fiction. An imaginary-world fantasy according to the Tolkien model. A novel of rebellious youth on the cutting edge of whatever they're cutting this week. This last is one of the really old chestnuts. It accounts for everything from *The Rampant Age* by Robert Spencer Carr in the 1920s to (with varying degrees of accuracy) *The Great Gatsby* and *The Catcher in the Rye*, to any number of 1950's paperback about juvenile delinquents, to the works of Bert Easton Ellis, to whoever inevitably has followed him into that niche.

Some genres come and go. The aforementioned juvenile delinquent novels were big stuff in the '50s, particularly in paperback. As any collector of vintage paperbacks knows, '50s juvie novels had a distinct look, with repeating iconography: the black leather jackets, the switchblades, and, inevitably, a cigarette dangling loosely from the sneering lips of a tough hood and, usually, one of the girls.

The *Lost Race* novel, the story about the lost city inhabited by survivors of ancient Atlantis or wherever, completely cut off from modern civilization and maintaining its ancient lifestyle and supernatural wonders in a volcanic valley in Darkest Africa (or wherever), began more or less with H. Rider Haggard in the nineteenth century and died out somewhere in the early twentieth, although there are still sporadic revivals. But there used to be hundreds of these books. The problem was—as the world became more and more explored—finding places to lose the lost city. Edgar Rice Burroughs solved that one deftly in 1911 by moving the whole business to Mars, where he could also have four-armed warriors and egg-laying princesses. He created a new genre, the interplanetary romance, which was a dominant model into at least the 1930s, when science fiction, which had gained genre-awareness in specialized pulp magazines, began to evolve in other directions. You can still find late, degenerate interplanetary romances, written in imitation of Edgar Rice Burroughs, being published well into the 1970s.

Another example of a forgotten genre is the "road book," which exists at least in publishing lore, if no longer in the mind of the public. When Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* became such a hit, there was a fashion for other books about rootless young drifters discovering America, the meaning of life, and their inner selves while thumbing their noses at authority. The film *Easy Rider* was a reflection of this genre. But somewhere along the line "road books" stopped selling, and there were no more of them.

Now, here is the challenging question: Is genre awareness a good thing or a bad thing? If somebody sat down and said, "I'm going to write a 'road book,'" rather than just unselfconsciously baring his soul in the midst of a travel novel, would that make for a better or worse performance?

II.

Let me suggest that the conscious genre writer has an advantage. The fantasy writer, the science-fiction writer, or whatever, is like the anthropologist gazing in on the island paradise of the Literary Establishment, or Mainstream, or the Halls of Academe, or whatever

you want to call it, where the benighted natives still think that their quaint customs and folkways are the *only* ways, the established laws of the universe, instead of one of many possible paths of literary endeavor. That is why mainstream literary novels are sometimes published with the words "a novel" on the cover. Of course the latest Discworld book is a novel too, as is *The Lord of the Rings* (which was only broken into three volumes for the publisher's convenience; the archetypal trilogy, ironically, isn't one).

But the literature professor, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* reviewer, and several mainstream novelists I have met don't know that. They lack broader perspective. They think their little island is the whole world. John Updike is a genre writer. He has even ventured outside his home genre into science fiction and fantasy on occasion. *The Witches of Eastwick* has a lot in common with *Apocalypse*.

The latest Philip Roth novel, *The Plot Against America*, is an alternate history, a work in an established genre that includes such classics as Keith Roberts's *Piranesi* and Ward Moore's *Bring the Jubilee*, not to mention any number of Harry Turtledove novels, and even such archaic curiosities as *When William Came* by Saki, which was published before the First World War and is about Kaiser Wilhelm conquering England. As yet I have not read the Roth book. But I heard him interviewed about it on National Public Radio. It *sounds* like a good book, more personal in focus than most alternate histories. It's about Roth's own childhood and his imagining how his own family would have fared in a sinister, subtly antisemitic America in which Charles Lindbergh became president in 1940 and the United States remained neutral during World War II.

But nowhere in the radio show did either Roth or the interviewer let on that there has ever been a book like this before or that it belongs to a recognized genre. He is getting amazed reviews from mainstream sources. He is wowing the primitives, reinventing the wheel.

We have to admit that while such "mainstream wander-ins," as I have arrogantly called such books, are indeed often primitive and dated—for example, Walter Mosley's cyberpunk novel, which seems

to come out of an alternate universe in which William Gibson never happened—some of the others knock over the standard genre product for nines. Think of Bernard Wolfe's *Limbo*, George Orwell's *1984*, Gore Vidal's *Masters*, all great science fiction novels, considerably better than the Ace Doubles of the same period.

Oh yes, I was supposed to be talking about fantasy. Think of *Portrait of Jennie* by Robert Nathan, *Grendel* and *Freddy's Book* (but nothing else) by John Gardner, *The Wandering Unicorn* by Manuel Mujica-Lainez, all of which are infinitely superior to one more generic fantasy novel following the post-Tolkien pattern wittily described by Brian Aldiss as "three cub-scouts and a moron defeat Hitler." (There is another strange cliché in such books, which I discovered by accident when reviewing three random titles for one of my columns. In two out of three, the Fellowship of the Good Guys, on a Quest, deep into enemy territory, menaced on all sides by nameless unspeakables or unspeakable namelessnesses, stop in the middle of the woods at night and light a roaring campfire with no concern for how far the light might carry. In other words, outdoorsy novels by writers who have never been there.)

III.

Literary and critical provincialism works both ways. It enlightens no one. The bastion or island or ivory tower of Serious Literature is, let us face it, gazed upon with envy by "genre" types, who may enjoy higher sales and have a larger readership and even a better shot at literary immortality than the darlings of the Literary Establishment. Be honest now. Any writer who doesn't in his heart of hearts want his works to be presented to generations of students as classics or reviewed reverentially in *The New Yorker* or *The New York Times Book Review* and won't admit it—at least when you get a few drinks into him or otherwise remove inhibitions—is, very likely, either a very good liar or a little bit nuts.

Even Frederick Faust, the great pulp writer of many pseudonyms (best known as Max Brand, the author of countless westerns and the

David Langford Random Reading 8

Mark Dunn, *Elle Minnow Pea* (2002). I enjoyed this "progressively lipogrammatic" allegory of constraints imposed by Language Police as letter after letter is censored from the alphabet. The epistolary construction is clever enough, and the moral impeccably liberal. One niggle, though. The emergent McGuffin or quest object is a pangrammatic sentence which by sheer serendipity is "accidentally" written down and only much later recognized for what it is. But it's a well-known pangram that, for those familiar with word games, sticks out like a fluorescent thumb on its first appearance. (I've given it at the end of this article, to preserve the slightest semblance of a spoiler warning.) Hence an increasing tendency to drum one's fingers and mutter, "Where are they going to spot it?" James Blith once argued that authors who pattern stories on chess games should invent their own, like Lewis Carroll, rather than imitate the moves of classic matches, like Poul Anderson ("The Immortal Game") and John Brunner (*The Squares of the City*). Should Dunn have constructed a new pangram? Too difficult, perhaps. All good fun, though not up to the lyrical standard of James Thurber's classic *The Wonderful O* (1955).

Clifton Fadiman, ed., *Fantasia Mathematica* (1958), the legendary anthology of mathematical tales, extracts, and oddments that—with its companion volume *The Mathematical Magpie* (1962)—inspired many further sf stories on related themes. Greg Bear once described his "Tangents" as an homage to the Fadiman collections; Rudy Rucker loved them and recreated their flavor for a later decade by compiling *Mathematics: Tales of Mathematical Wonder* (1987). *Fantasia Mathematica* is full of rare and tasty material, including Kurt Lasswitz's thought experiment "The Universal Library," the inspiration for that unforgettable Jorge Luis Borges nightmare "The Library of Babel." (See also Borges's essay

"The Total Library.") Though aware for decades that this volume existed, I never came across a copy until one day a black grimoire taught me how to conjure the demon amazon.com and pay its terrible price. . . .

Alan Moore & Kevin O'Neill, *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen: Volume II* (2003). Fresh from dealing with Moriarty and Fu-Manchu in Volume I, the League now faces a Martian invasion. The action begins on a panfictional and very red Mars, with Lieut. Gulliver Jones (complete with flying carpet) joining John Carter and his multiarmed Baroomians, with backup from C. S. Lewis's *Sorcerer*, to attack the fortress of the unpleasant "molluscs"—H. G. Wells's Martians, who now appear to be launching spacecraft. Cut to huge crater in a field outside London. . . . The heat rays, tripod war machines, and scenes of destruction are most strikingly reimagined. As humanity is betrayed by the most unreliable member of the cast, and Captain Nemo's *Nautilus* defends besieged London, it becomes necessary to seek dark biological expertise from Dr. Moreau—whose current hybrid experiments include the creation of Rupert Bear and chums, plus familiar figures from Beatrix Potter and *The Wind in the Willows*. (Uncontrollable giggling from the present reviewer throughout these scenes.) As before, the whole graphic novel is crammed with such little treats and allusions. Moore's best work of reinvention is the monstrous Mr. Hyde, who develops into a genuinely complex figure without ever ceasing to be a monster. When he crosses London by cab at the height of the war panic, Hyde's thoughtful, even tranquil, expression makes an obvious contrast with wild scenes of looting and Hogarthian drunkenness on the streets; but next comes his most appalling and protracted (though partially justified) murder to date. Finally, with dozens of Martian tripods massed on the South Bank of the Thames for their last push to victory, Hyde gets to play

Doctor Kildare series) yearned for literary respectability. A disciplined professional, he devoted part of his day to the steady production of pulp fiction. But he also set aside time in which he locked himself away and wrote what was intended to be exquisite and profound poetry. *With a quill pen.*

Edgar Rice Burroughs wanted respectability too. He made repeated attempts at social realism. He even tried to one-up Robert Graves (whose *J. Claudius* was a big hit at the time) with *I Am a Barbarian*, which actually did rise above the level of the routine Burroughs product of about 1940 (by which time he was cranking out inferior, late Tarzans and Mars books). It's a fast-moving inside story of Julio-Claudian politics, told from the point of view of a slave and boyhood companion of Caligula, a novel filled with genuine wit, some almost Monty-Pythonesque, grotesque comedy (including a crucifixion scene that recalls *The Life of Brian*), and eccentric characterizations. But for all that, it doesn't make it as a serious novel, probably because Burroughs couldn't bring himself to depict the depravities of the adult Caligula. Burroughs seems to have lost heart and wrapped up the book in a hurry. It was never published in his lifetime.

Yes, we all want literary respectability, even if we hold the Literary Establishment in contempt. It is a curiously schizophrenic attitude. We hear a lot of rationalizations about being "just paid entertainers." This is the standard defense mechanism for writers of L. Sprague de Camp's generation, writers who got their start in the pulps of the Depression and developed an impenetrable shell of "I'm just a working stiff, not an artist." For some of them, including, I fear, my old friend Sprague, this was limiting. It hobbed their aspirations. For others, like Fritz Leiber, or Henry Kuttner, very likely it did not.

Anyway, calling the other guy names like "ScriLis" or even "LiFi" may be amusing, but it doesn't accomplish very much. It is at best a minor tool of satirical discourse.

The largest single fiction genre is *romance*, something everybody likes to look down upon, even as it outsells everything else. We like to imagine that one day a literary encyclopedia will have an entry

that reads: "Hemingway, Ernest. A minor contemporary of Tolkien limited by his inability to achieve broader thematic range and appeal." But it's just as likely to read: "A minor contemporary of Daphne du Maurier..."

IV.

For the fantastic in literature, let me tell you when I heard the Crack of Doom.

It was the 1974 or 1975 Lunacon. Lin Carter had just been fired in 1974 as the editor of the Ballantine Adult Fantasy Series and was replaced by Lester del Rey. At that point we knew del Rey as a Golden Age sf writer, the author of "Helen O'Loyn" and "Nerves." As a critical polemicist, he was a staunch opponent of the New Wave. He had edited some short-lived digests in the early 1950s, including one quite good one, *Fantasy Fiction*.

What would he do as a fantasy book editor? The audience wanted to know. Del Rey was addressing a large auditorium full of people, virtually the entire attendance of the convention. (This was back in the days of one-track programming.) People started to ask him about the sort of writers he was looking for and would publish. Since our awareness of fantasy, as a distinct genre, was quite a recent development—somehow the oldest form of literature, from which everything else branched off, did not become a distinct publishing category with its own label on the spine of a paperback until 1969—the examples were taken from the Ballantine Adult Fantasy Series.

Would del Rey publish a latter-day Ernest Bramah, author of the Kai Lung series?

No, absolutely not.

How about Lord Dunsany?

"Yes," del Rey said, "but I would tell him he didn't need all that fancy style to tell a good story."

I won't say my jaw dropped, but that's the equivalent of saying, "Well, Mister Shakespeare, *Hamlet* has a nifty plot, but why do you need all this distracting poetry?" ("It's a generic convention,"

Horatius at the Bridge—dressed to the nines and singing, for whatever mad reason, "You should see me dance the polka..." Volume II is full of unforgettable scenes and images, far more so than Volume I. Let us not speak of the film.

Terry Pratchett, *Going Postal* (2004), marking the twenty-first anniversary of the Discworld comic fantasy phenomenon. Again Pratchett examines just what makes his great and malodorous city of Ankh-Morpork tick, and the means by which devious dictator Lord Vetinari keeps it ticking. Past novels have transformed the deadbeats of the City Watch into a functional police force that now struggles to cope with the side effects of technological upheaval—like the printing press of *The Truth* (2000), which rapidly spawned newspapers, investigative journalism, and an equivalent of *The Weekly World News*. The space program in *The Last Hero* (2001) was a one-off; of far greater consequence to this world is the "clacks" semaphore system that's revolutionized global, or discoid, communications with c-mail. Noting the vicious business practices of the major clacks cartel, Vetinari slyly introduces competition by reviving the moribund Ankh-Morpork Post Office under new management—a convicted con man named Moist von Lipwig by dotting if unwise parents. Ensuing complications involve much postal lore and legend, golems, dread initiations, obsessive collectors (of pins rather than stamps; there's an excruciating scene in a pin hobby shop), arson, a nonhuman assassin, and the equivalent of net hackers. The climax sees a John Henry challenge of man versus machine, with von Lipwig and the high-speed c-mail system racing to deliver a long-distance message. Our swindler hero rises to the occasion, rejecting one way of fighting dirty—a clacks virus that could make the semaphore post literally crash and burn—in favor of his own special skill with words. Very clever and very funny.

Frederik Pohl, *The Boy Who Would Live Forever* (2004), a belated fifth volume in the Heechee series. Intelligent and engagingly told, as always, but very much a book of bits. I sensed this even before checking the copyright page to discover that three chunks, with different protagonists, appeared separately as standalone stories. The overall

action starts during the time of book two, *Beyond the Blue Event Horizon*, and fast-forwards through the rest of the sequence and beyond, thanks to familiar time-dilation effects. There are pleasant characters, such as the "stovemind" AI who finds *bants* *cuisine* the best challenge to his vast processing power, and handles mere trifles like military strategy as a sideline (at one stage delegating it to 293 AI sous-chefs). A villain is recycled from earlier in the sequence, and—like other not terribly convincing bad guys in *The Annals of the Heechee*—is rather too easily disposed of. The universe-killing "Assassins," sinister but no longer regarded as a menace, make one brief, bodeful appearance and then vanish a little unsatisfactorily from the story. A book of bits.

Peter Weston, *With Stars in My Eyes: My Adventures in British Fandom* (2004): another NESFA Press publication, marking Peter Weston's 2004 Worldcon appearance as fan guest of honor. It's an engaging fanish autobiography of the Briton who founded the longrunning Birmingham (UK) SF Group, chaired the 1979 Worldcon in Brighton, and now manufactures the Hugo trophies. Portions appeared in fanzines which have become hard to find; the cumulative effect, despite occasional sloppy punctuation, is greater than the sum of its parts. Our man's informal but hypnotic way with anecdotes transfers effectively from its normal convention-bar habitat to actual paper, with cartoons, graphics, photos, and an index. Secret histories abound, from the 1963 beginning of sexual intercourse—that is, Wesmanian fan contact—through youthful indiscretions of future sf notables, to the climactic 1979 Brighton Worldcon. I'd have relished this even without the remarkable (considering how late in the timeline I turned up) number of Langford namechecks. Essential reading for connoisseurs of fandom's checkered history.

(The pangram in question is "Pack my box with five dozen liquor jugs.")

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Shakespeare would answer.)

I understood at that point what was completely borne out by his later performance. Lester del Rey was purely a pulp editor, who saw fiction as product, perhaps as a device for conveying interesting ideas, but paid no attention whatever to its subtler and richer effects. Indeed, he once said to me in an interview that if he could be paid as much to do wiring diagrams as write fiction, he would do wiring diagrams. He had no artistic pretensions at all. Here was that Depression-era, writer-as-working-stiff attitude at its very worst. It had left his soul a dried-out husk.

Oh yes, the Crack of Doom. You were waiting for that. Lester del Rey then went on to some length and with great enthusiasm about a hot new writer and a great new book he was going to publish. He was talking about Terry Brooks and *The Sword of Shannara*, which, del Rey assured us, would change the fantasy field forever.

Alas, he published it in 1977 and alas, he was right. Twenty years of darkness followed. Epic or mythic fantasy, which had previously held some reasonable claim to literary respectability, which could aspire to artistic ambition without being laughed at—far better to be seen as a brilliant, if poorly-understood eccentric, like a Tolkien or a Peake or a T. H. White—was suddenly transformed into generic product, very much like (and selling more like) those despised romance novels. Medieval Harlequins, with elves. In bug-crushing trilogies.

This certainly had a major impact on the career of every fantasy writer alive today, particularly the ones who were a couple years either side of twenty and just starting out as Lester del Rey was speaking. We do not remember him fondly or honor his name. Instead we admire and salute the writers who somehow broke through the del Rey

mold. As someone remarked in this context, no system of oppression is totally complete. Fantasy may have been established as formulaic junk in the minds of the publishing world, the public, and the critical establishment (even within the science fiction critical establishment), but it was still possible for John Crowley to publish *Little, Big*, for Ellen Kushner and Tanith Lee and Michael Swannick and Charles de Lint and Greer Ilene Gilman to do genuinely ambitious fiction, even (particularly in Gilman's case) difficult and demanding work within the fantasy field. Not, I note, for Del Rey Books. But they did it. They're ones we take our hats off to. (And, to be fair, even Del Rey published a couple of good novels by Phyllis Eisenstein and Tim Powers.)

V.

What I conclude is that no form of literature should be dismissed. The realistic novel has its place, even the much-maligned novel of academia and adultery. The romance novel has its place. So does the western. When somebody tells you "poetry is dead" or "the theater is dead," the answer must always be, "No, as long as artists of ability do serious, sincerely-imagined work within it, it is not dead. Anything else is a problem of marketing."

The epic or romantic fantasy, which has been with us since before the beginnings of writing and is distinguished by its ability to address mythic concerns directly—not metaphorically, like James Joyce's *Ulysses* or the plays of Eugene O'Neill, but head on, with the gods brought on stage if necessary—also has its place in the vast dream that is literature. It is a very important place.

Fantasy is also now a genre. If it was ever possible for a writer to "invent" fantasy, that time has passed. Anyone writing such fiction today is doing so in the inescapable presence of predecessors, even as a subset of fantasy, Arthurian fiction, has been tied to its roots for the past thousand years. Tolkien is likewise inescapable. You may accept him, or reject him as Michael Moorcock has, but anything you write, in some sense, is very likely to be part of a dialogue with him.

But of course when Shakespeare was writing *Hamlet*, he was working within and against the genre confines of the Jacobean revenge tragedy. Apuleius was working within the genre of what he called "the Milesian tale," which had become synonymous with racy stories, almost pornography, but was, in his hands at least, a whole lot more. (That may be why his example survived and so many others didn't.) The mainstream writer looks back on precedents too, perhaps to Henry James, or Henry Fielding, or Daniel Defoe. But his is a more modern form. His roots aren't quite as deep. The fantasy writer looks back to Tolkien, but hopefully further back, to *The Tempest*, to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and maybe even to Apuleius and Homer.

All any of us can do is try to escape the Lester del Rey of this world, try to produce work that matters, at least to the writer, rather than formula work that matters only to accountants.

Yeah, it's genre. At this stage of civilization, everything is. There may come a time when it becomes decadent, as late classical writing did—hundreds of years after Apuleius, in the days of Sidonius Apollinaris and Nonnos of Panopolis, in which the height of "fine" writing was to cram in as many mythical allusions as possible as obscurely as possible to hide the fact that the writer had nothing to say.

If that happens, some rebellious genius will have to throw away the accumulated conventions of centuries and start over.

But I don't think it has happened yet. Good, even great work is still possible, as long as fantasy, like any other type of writing, responds not only to previous writings, but to life itself. The fresh input comes from the times in which we live. Even as James Branch Cabell was uniquely a writer of the 1920s, Terry Pratchett is uniquely a writer of now. How long either will last is a crap shoot. It depends on how well the contents of their books just happen to match the concerns of their just unborn.

So we just do our best and muddle through. As for the Literary Establishment, there's nothing you can do about them. Maybe one day they'll venture out of their little preserve to find out what the excitement is about. ►

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The Plot Against America by Philip Roth
New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2004; \$26.00 hc; 400 pages
reviewed by Paul Kincaid

Over the last 30 years or so, Philip Roth has blazed an inescapable trail across the American literary firmament. He was controversial when he started out, writing novels about sex, and Jewish sex at that. For a while controversy turned, as it often does, into notoriety; the inevitable reaction set in and his critical reputation nosedived. Finally, starting with *American Pastoral*, in which he began to make a critical examination of American history the central force of his fiction, his reputation rose again. *The Plot Against America*, in many ways the climax of that engagement with history, comes when he is again at the peak of literary respectability, and, true to form, it has been garlanded with praise from all the big critical gobs. Whether Roth has dabbled with genre before is beside the point, since this new book is an outright and unapologetic venture into alternate history, new territory for him, and that is one of the things that has got the critics so excited. Wow, who'd have thought of doing that?

The thing you realize the moment you start reading this book is that Roth knows nothing about how alternate history works—and presumably neither do any of the critics who have so lauded the book. It is, by turns, brilliant and dreadful. The penultimate chapter is probably the most amateurish thing I've come across in any alternate history, but the chapter which precedes it is probably one of the finest.

In the broadest terms, alternate histories tell two stories: the drama in the foreground, and the other history that provides the background to that drama. Except in a few rare (and generally unsuccessful) examples, the two stories cannot be separated: the story we are watching up close would not be happening if the historical background had not taken the particular shape it has. Structurally, this is a characteristic shared by the vast majority of science fictions; even where the story is set in our familiar world, the background cannot be assumed but must be told. The measure of the writer of alternate history is in the balance achieved between the two stories.

Roth's background story starts with the premise that Charles Lindbergh, American hero and outspoken anti-Semite, wins the Republican nomination in the 1940 presidential race, then goes on to defeat Roosevelt for the White House. (He does this, noticeably, by appearing brave and resolute and by spouting simplistic nonsense. It is, I am sorry to say, one of the more believable aspects of this book: how easily the American public, any public, falls for this rubbish.) In power, Lindbergh keeps America out of the war, signs treaties with Japan and Germany, and slowly initiates a series of policies attacking the Jews. It is this last, clearly, which is the important message of the book, and, though the specifics of the Lindbergh presidency are fresh, it's a familiar scenario. Up front we have the story of an average lower-middle-class Jewish family in New Jersey. The story of the Lindbergh presidency could easily be integrated into their lives. Such an approach requires the author to trust his readers to recognize the broad picture behind the narrow focus, but most literary works about the political, social or cultural state of the nation require just such an act of trust.

Unfortunately, Roth, tentatively presenting his different United States, is unwilling to ask his readers to make a leap that he himself is clearly nervous about. The background, therefore, is filled in by the most blatant, lumpy infodumps. The early chapters become almost unreadable in places, like a crass popular history written by someone with no affinity for the subject. Newspaper stories are read, and then explained; long passages describe in needless detail the minutiae of Lindbergh's rise to power; newsreels are described, and then filtered so that they become more like an academic lesson than a snapshot of a moment in history.

It is only when he has Lindbergh comfortably ensconced in the White House that Roth turns his full attention upon the core story, revealing the human consequences of these political transformations. We follow one Jewish family in Newark, New Jersey, the Roths—the author plundering his own family, as he has done in other novels—to give the story its tremendous emotional impact. Nine-year-old Philip is the narrator, filtering great events through the normal incomprehensions and obsessions of childhood. Hearing his father rant about the threat of the Lindbergh election brings upon young

Philip the first impact of the changing times through the divided loyalty he feels about his precious stamp collection commemorating Lindbergh's flying feats. His father, meanwhile, is a secure, well-off insurance salesman who has already turned down a promotion because it would involve moving to a non-Jewish neighborhood. Though he might complain loudly to his cronies about the world situation, it seems it will not directly affect him and his family.

But events do come to affect them, at first through members of their extended family. Glamorous Aunt Evelyn becomes the mistress of the quibbling rabbi who becomes the Jew in charge of most of the Lindbergh anti-Jewish programs (they are called, in the way of such things, "Americanization"). Cousin Alvin, charming and dangerous, crosses into Canada so he can fight in the war against Germany, and almost immediately returns, minus a leg, to drift into crime. Then, Philip's older brother, Sandy, is sent to spend a month on a Kentucky farm as part of the Americanization program, and returns an enthusiast for the new way. More and more, Philip's split loyalties (by turns hero-worshipping Alvin and Sandy, being seduced by the glamour of Evelyn) and his confusion over the language of Americanization that does not sound as threatening as his father makes it out to be, reflect the confusions and split loyalties of the Jewish community as a whole.

Very slowly, things fall apart. Friends move to Canada, Philip's father quits his job to avoid being forced to relocate to the Midwest; and their downstairs neighbors, the widow, Mrs. Washow, and her son, are forcibly relocated to Kentucky. Riots start up, and Philip and his mother are sheltered by the Italian family who have moved into the apartment downstairs. Then, from a harrowing phone call from family friend Seldon, we discover that his mother has been murdered in an anti-Semitic attack. A rescue mission is dispatched to bring Seldon back to Newark, while the Roth family starts to disintegrate. Tensions are exacerbated, differences blown up and then reconciled, strengths and weaknesses tested. There is no melodrama, no big events, but the remorseless portrait of how ordinary lives are turned upside down by such political changes is absolutely masterful. I don't know of any novel which has so brilliantly and teachingly captured the full human consequences of its alternate history as *The Plot Against America* does in the long chapter called "The Winchell Riots." (In this universe, the radio personality Walter Winchell becomes the voice of those protesting against Lindbergh's government, until his murder sparks an anti-Jewish pogrom.)

Then, in the very next chapter, Roth takes his eye off his family, and the whole thing falls apart. Instead of seeing the change and its repercussions from street level, as he has done in his focus on the minutiae of how the Roth family is affected, we suddenly draw back for a distanced, uninvolved, newsreel view of great events. Riots spread across the country, then—mysteriously—Lindbergh disappears; amid the rumor and counter-rumor, it seems that his wife has been confined to a mental hospital. But she escapes dramatically and publicly denounces the Nazi plot against America. Abruptly, in a cascade of events that go ludicrously against the political flow of the novel, the Lindbergh regime is overthrown, Franklin Roosevelt resumes his rightful place in the White House, and, after two years of discontinuity, everything fits back seamlessly into the pattern of history that we know.

We have gone from the sublime of "The Winchell Riots" to the ridiculousness of a chapter that does not make sense in political or historic terms. It instead demonstrates a palpable fear on Roth's part to trust either his creation or his audience. In these two chapters, Roth has separated out the emotional climax of his foreground story (which is stunningly good) and the intellectual climax of his background story (which is stunningly bad), yet there was absolutely no need to do this. If he had trusted his alternate history more, kept it all more tightly focused on young Philip and his family, the impact and the message of this novel would have been inescapable. This is, without doubt, a very good novel, but it might have been a great one. ▀

Paul Kincaid lives in Folkestone, Kent.

The Best Time Travel Stories of the 20th Century,
edited by Harry Turtledove, with Martin H. Greenberg
New York: Del Rey Books, 2005; \$17.95 tpb; 425 pages
reviewed by David Mead

This is the third of three "Best" volumes from Del Rey edited by Harry Turtledove, assisted by the indefatigable anthologist Marty Greenberg. The others are *The Best Alternate History Stories of the 20th Century* and *The Best Military Science Fiction Stories of the 20th Century*. All are serviceable collections, although they may be of more use to libraries and readers new to them than to older fans/readers who may have read most of these in the original or in other anthologies.

In a way, this collection is itself time travel of a sort, transporting stories written between 1941 and 1994 into their future, or our present. But its exclusion of stories published outside that range calls into question the claim of collecting the "best" time-travel stories, as does its omission of William Tenn's classic, and I think timely, "Brooklyn Project" (1948) and Robert A. Heinlein's "All You Zombies . . ." (1959). But quibbles like this aside, *The Best Time Travel Stories* is a fine anthology, each story a pleasure to read and collectively an excellent microcosm of an important subgenre of sf.

There are eighteen stories in *The Best Time Travel Stories*, starting with Theodore Sturgeon's witty, metaphysical tale "Yesterday Was Monday" (1941), about a mechanic named Harry Wright, who finds himself behind the scenes of history and discovers, much to his distress, that all the world really is a stage and all of us merely players. Whereas Sturgeon's story holds up very well, Henry Kuttner's "Time Locker" (1943) seems just a little dated now, although the story handles its ideas of divergent time rates wonderfully. The quasi-hard-boiled-detective tone, combined with the playful absurdity of the alcoholic inventor Gallagher, just didn't seem quite so clever at this reading as it did back in the '50s, when I

found it in a pile of old *Attondend* magazines. "Time's Arrow" by Arthur C. Clarke (1950) is a straightforward story about the dangers of going back into the past unprepared, memorable largely for the verisimilitude of its portrayal of the daily life of paleontologists, tracking the spoor of dead dinosaurs through cons of buried time. Unlike Ray Bradbury's famous "A Sound of Thunder," the transformation of the present that comes from meddling with the past is hardly noticed in Clarke's low-key tale. In fact, the consequences that follow the accident in the ancient past are not really consistently rendered. Bradbury's "A Sound of Thunder" (1952), which is currently being made into a film by director Peter Jackson, is much more explicit, and provocative, about the dangers of interfering with the past, and the changes that follow upon the crushing of a butterfly 60 million years ago. It's a story well worth reading today, given current politics and Bradbury's consciousness of the sociopolitical consequences of very minor alterations of history. Similar to Bradbury's is L. Sprague de Camp's "A Gun For Dinosaur" (1956), which takes hunters back in time to the Cretaceous period to shoot the greatest land beast of history, *T. rex*. Reading de Camp, one is far more likely to think of Ernest Hemingway's African hunting stories than of Bradbury, for de Camp is much more interested in the human experience of the hunt and its immediate consequences than he is in any reformation of history. de Camp disposes of Bradbury's causality in the first few pages of his story, leaving his story free to take a different path.

Two other stories from the early '50s which Turtledove includes are Jack Finney's "I'm Scared" (1951), a quiet little tale of temporal anomalies and what they might portend to a world yearning for those happy days of yore; and Richard Matheson's "Death Ship" (1953). Of all the stories here, I found the Matheson the least interesting, despite its having been made into an episode of Rod Serling's famous television series *The Twilight Zone*. It seems to me a kind of science-fictional horror story, more interested in generating a gasp of terror and despair as the crew realizes they are lost forever about an interstellar flying Dutchman than in exploring ideas about time.

Paul Anderson's contribution—"The Man Who Came Early" (1956)—is a fine if sad reply to the kind of time travel tale spawned by Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. That is, a story like Leo Frankowski's *The Cross-Time Engineer* or H. Beam Piper's classic *Lord Kalvan of Orlendene*, where clever men cope with the shock of translation to another age by using their knowledge of modern science and technology to empower themselves. Lacking the technological infrastructure that underlies modernity, Anderson's Sergeant Gerald Robbins, U.S. Army, despite arriving in ancient Iceland armed and speaking Norwegian, is utterly unable to make his knowledge and skills useful, and—ignorant of the mores of the people he encounters—dies a bitter, tragic death. This is a fine antidote to the arrogant myth of modernity's superiority and inevitable triumph over the foolish, ignorant, defective past.

Immediately following Anderson's tale is a short comic piece by R.A. Lafferty which offers a witty take on how changing the past changes the present. "Rainbird" (1961) reminds us how hard it is to make the future be what we want it to be. Higginson Rainbird is a far more interesting inventor than Kuttner's Gallagher, even if in the end he isn't much of one.

In his introduction, Turtledove discriminates between the alternate-history and the time-travel story, but for the life of me, I can't see how Larry Niven's "Leviathan" (1970) is the latter and not the former, and not even the former but an alternate-fantasy-reality story, where fairies and dragons and the creatures of our wildest imaginings can be captured and brought back into the mundane present as zoo specimens. And if you are going to have a story like this here, why not include Jack Vance's wonderful "Rumfiddle" (1973) where the entire leadership of the Nazi Party of 1939 is

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Illustration by W.H.C. Guest of Honor Allen K.

redirected to become the staff of a Catskills hotel?

A number of the selections from the '70s, '80s, and '90s seem to me to shift emphasis just a little, illuminating the internal emotional experience of traveling in time rather than describing the external consequences of time travel. Stories like Joe Haldeman's "Anniversary Project" (1975), Jack Dann's "Timetipping" (1975), John Kessel's "The Pure Product" (1986), Nancy Kress's "The Price of Oranges" (1989), and Ursula K. Le Guin's "Another Story, or A Fisherman of the Inland Sea" (1994) let us in on how it feels to move in time, to know in a visceral, emotional way what was and will be, even when that experience is bitter madness (viz. Kessel, whose title comes from the first lines of the poem "To Elsie" by William Carlos Williams: "The pure products of America go crazy").

The emphasis on the emotional experience of time travel by the principal characters is particularly true in the longest stories in here—Connie Willis's acclaimed "Fire Watch" (1982) and Robert Silverberg's "Sailing to Byzantium" (1985). In both, the experience of the past and the future, by travelers from the future and past, is crucial to the construction of their humanity and their fundamental personal reality. Two of the best time-travel stories written in the past sixty years, these stories are completely worthy of inclusion here.

Not all the stories, of course, are as centered on rendering the emotional experience of past or future. Charles Sheffield's "Trapalanda" (1987), although it certainly deals with the emotional lives of its characters, is built around hard-science concepts of time and relativity, whereas Kress and Silverberg gloss over the tech that conveys their travelers in time.

As a collection, *The Best Time Travel Stories of the 20th Century* is a solid success for the reader. If you are looking for time-travel stories, this would be a good book to get, even though I think you can argue that they really aren't absolutely, positively the best of the twentieth century. ▶

David Mead lives in Corpus Christi, Texas.

Photos continued from page 3.



Ray Cramer, Elizabeth Hartwell, Leo Cramer, & Peter Hartwell after both the kids' pajama party and the masquerade (where Peter went as a sphynx).



David Hartwell, checked, holds forth in the bar.

Screeed (letters of comment)

Hank Luttrell, Madison, Wisconsin

Somehow, the article on "The Eye of Argon" in the November issue escaped my notice. I did read Jerry Kaufman's comment in the January issue, however, which caused me to go back and read Lee Weinstein's piece, and prompts this note.

The first I can remember hearing of Jim Thiel's story was an e-mail I got last year which asked if I had been the editor of a St. Louis fanzine called *Osfan*. If I had, it went on, perhaps I still had a copy of the 10th issue which included the worst story of all time, "The Eye of Argon." "What?!" I thought. I never published fiction in *Osfan*. Then I realized that the inquiry must be referring to the issues of *Osfan* published in the '70s, after I gave it up and other editors and publishers took over. I published about 50 issues, most while I was a teenager, but then decided to pass it along. I wasn't going to be living in St. Louis any longer, it was a local club newszine (while I did it, anyway), I was getting married, I was going to do other things. I'm sure I received copies of the re-launched, re-numbered *Osfan*, but I don't remember it too well, nor I have I kept my collection of fanzines. I don't remember the story. Not only didn't I publish fiction, I usually didn't read fan fiction, either.

I am sure of a few bits of fan history, however. The woman who turned the mimeo crank for that 10th issue of *Osfan* (vol. 2) could not have been Leigh Couch or Joyce Fisher (now Katz). I recall that the new editor was Douglas "Doc" Clarke, and the people helping him were others living in a St. Louis area Stan Shack.

I have mixed feelings about this situation. I guess you can tell that I don't want to be known as the publisher/editor of the Worst

Story Ever. On the other hand, I think it is rather mean-spirited to give that distinction to an unassuming amateur story, when there are so many professional stories vying for the distinction.

Jennie Blackford, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia

Henry Wessells, in his letter in issue 196, seems to take my reference to "chronological difficulties" in my review of Silverlock in issue 195 as a complaint about the novel. He writes: "The chronology of the Commonwealth of Letters is precisely other than our linear time," and goes on to defend the overlap in the "Commonwealth of Letters" of millennia of fictional characters.

This was never in dispute. My point would have been clearer if I had written "geographical and chronological dislocations," rather than "chronological difficulties." What I wrote was, "The chronological difficulties never seem to concern him [the hero, Silverlock]. He travels in moments from Ancient Greece to Arthurian England to Medieval Europe without turning a hair." What I had intended to express is that we are confronted with a character who seems so lacking in self-awareness, and awareness of others, that he does not even notice the strangeness of multiple major changes of era and lifestyle. To me, this was indicative of his lack of a realized inner life. He seems seldom to care about anything except his own physical comfort. I'd have been happier if I'd felt more confident that Silverlock himself was in fact changing inside, as the psychodrama of the novel was proceeding around him.

Dazed & Confused

We have spent over one hundred hours installing and reinstalling software, searching the web, and using cumbersome workarounds to try to get all our computers working with our printers and our fonts displaying correctly. We are doing this in part because we are finally switching away from our DTP layout software PageMaker—which has worked fine for the last 200 months and does everything we wanted it to, but which has been abandoned by its maker—to InDesign. (But we haven't done it yet—it may be a while.) All of this has only partially succeeded. It is at this moment that one begins to wonder if computers really work, if they save any time at all, or whether they should just be put in closets.

We already have computers in closets, of course, machines that worked perfectly well and did everything we needed until planned and unplanned obsolescence made them too much trouble to use and made us need more computers. This is apparently how computers reproduce. And we have been warned recently that some municipalities are beginning to charge people for trying to dispose of computers by throwing them away—to which my immediate response is, better get rid of them now. We will speak further about this in the future.



Geri Sullivan

Kathryn and I and the children spent the blizzard of '05 in Detroit, as Fan Guests of Honor at Confusion. It was a particularly fine way to be snowbound for a day. The convention was generous and helpful all the time, and we felt valued and cared for. Steve Brust was the GOH, and he attracted Emma Bull and Will Shetterly, the Fabulous Lorraine, Patrick Nielsen Hayden, and a bunch of old Minneapolis fans to play music. Confusion is one of the really good music cons anyway, but this was exceptional. There was good programming, good parties, and an especially good breakfast buffet at the Troy Marriot too.

We are about to head for Boskone as a family, and then I go solo to Shevacon in Roanoke before the next issue, so we ought to have a few choice pictures. Then as usual we make the big trip to Ft. Lauderdale for the ICFA in March, for which this issue is specially designed, with articles from and about guests of and regular attendees of the Conference. We're sure to see many of you at one place or another. ▶

—David G. Hartwell
& the editors

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